

Metaphysics, Mysticism and the Relaxation of Concepts

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Abstract: Philosophy can be roughly defined as, among other things, the investigation into particularly broad and fundamental concepts. In this paper, I attempt to make a shift in focus from particular philosophical concepts towards the nature of conceptualization in general. In examining the different kinds of conceptual orientations towards reality, I will offer two, opposing types: a metaphysical orientation, which considers concepts behind, inside and constitutive of reality, and a mystical orientation, which takes concepts less seriously, and as less integral to the smooth functioning of experience. After sketching out the two orientations, I will end by offering some normative implications of this outlook with regard to the philosophical life.

As is well known by those who try, it is difficult to come to a precise definition of the word “philosophy.” After all, there is an entire subfield of the discipline, known as “metaphilosophy,” that works on the topic, and no one has reached anything conclusive just yet. That being said, if I could be allowed to express one perspective on the nature of our discipline, without claiming it to be exhaustive, I would say philosophy is concerned with an individual’s stances on particularly general, vague, or wide-reaching concepts. That is, to perform the activity of ‘philosophizing’ on something usually requires that something to be a concept of said nature. Most of the hallmark concepts of our genre are placed under the umbrella of metaphysics and epistemology: terms like value, existence, reality, knowledge, mind, consciousness, et cetera are all examined and clarified. Areas that do not fit under those categories receive their own “philosophy of...”: art, mathematics, science, education, politics and society, sport and so on. Among all these subfields, what are most obviously held in common are the concepts: all are fundamental in constituting our experience and all refer to particular things through very broad strokes.

In clarifying and investigating the nature of these foundational concepts, philosophy is both useful in reorganizing our attitude towards reality (say, into a more ethically sound or politically just version) and personally enriching to those with the taste for it. But one thing I think would be helpful, towards a further scratching of this broad-concept itch that philosophers naturally seem to have, is to make a move from particular concepts (regardless of how non-particular their meaning may be) to *the nature of conceptualization in general*. Although investigating concepts-at-large is a tricky thing to do, I think it can lead us to a culmination of philosophizing--a place where we can really see the forest and not just massive groups of trees. It is no coincidence that one of the premier investigators of concepts-at-large, Wittgenstein, believed he had solved all the problems of philosophy when he first came to an understanding of language and conceptualization. Because philosophizing is so intimately tied into the fabric of conceptualization, a proper understanding of one leads directly into a proper understanding of the other.

In sketching out some beginning explorations into the nature of conceptualization, I'd like to stress that this is about an individual's relationship to the concepts that organize her experience--it is direct in life, and not a removed, *a priori* kind of exploration. Thus the way we will look at conceptualization will not be, itself, heavily conceptual. The goal is not to develop some theory of how human experience *becomes* conceptual--i.e., an investigation into how the brain creates concepts, the grammatical structures of language, etc. etc. The subject of our investigation will be more of a spontaneous, intuitive attitude. It is only when we deal with orientations-towards-concepts in this way that we can sketch out normative projects out of them.

There are two main orientations I would like to explore. The first orientation is “metaphysical”--which I will define as one which attempts to place concepts inside and underneath reality. In other words, a metaphysical orientation towards concepts ‘takes them seriously.’ The second orientation will be “mystical,” which will be its opposite. Mysticism is a melting and loosening of our conceptual distinctions of reality, which opens us up towards a more enriching relationship with direct experience. One does well in life to move towards the mystical end of things, for reasons which should become clear over the course of this essay.

To begin, it would be helpful to first offer the structure of a metaphysical orientation, and later give specific examples of it. A metaphysical orientation sees its concepts as supportive of reality, as identical in their ontology to tangible objects. They are felt to ‘hold’ reality, to keep everything together. Defining this orientation with the term “metaphysics” should be clear: beyond or behind the physical world (‘meta-’ to the physical world), the metaphysician finds a supporting world, full of his own ideas.

Take, for instance, romanticism. This isn’t meant in the sense of the 19th century artistic movement, but in an everyday-language sort of way. A few years ago, a good friend of mine (who was a very practical, realistically-minded person) took a trip to the Grand Canyon. After describing the trip, and his view of the Canyon, a more sentimental acquaintance piped up. “How did it feel, looking over the Grand Canyon? It must’ve made you feel so small--a little human, in the giant cosmos. That must’ve been amazing.” “No, no,” my friend responded. “Stop being romantic. I felt a little out of breath from the walk up there.” Expecting life to be full of these kinds of sentimental, intense experiences is what I mean by being romantic.

In the romantic's case, the desire for reality to appear especially beautiful or grandiose motivates them to fit experience into boxes of preconceived "beauty" and "grandiosity," forgetting the even-handed simplicity of everyday life. One puts the cart before the horse, letting conceptual expectations of how reality should be (usually more dramatic and emotional) come ahead of an investigation into how reality is. This is a perfect example of the metaphysical lifestyle.

Alongside an aesthetic preoccupation, a preoccupation with "self" is also metaphysical. This is usually called "taking oneself too seriously"--and the feeling that phrase refers to is the exact idea I'm aiming for. The person who takes a metaphysical attitude toward the self treats ideas of himself as huge in their importance--reality is seen through the self-lens, categorizing phenomena according to their importance to it. Thoughts are front-and-center, more real than experience without thought, and this generates a self-perpetuating loop that removes the metaphysician from fresh experiences of his constitutive environment.

Another, less obvious example of the metaphysical orientation is an especially judgmental attitude. 'Value' does not exist in direct, phenomenal reality, in the sense of a one-dimensional hierarchy where some are best, some are worst, and all are contrasted and compared against a predetermined scale. A scientific description of the phenomenon of "judgment" would simply explain the brain-chemicals involved in the process, without the description itself including any value at all.

Now this does not mean that without metaphysics one abandons value--it is better to say one abandons *judgment*. 'Value' in the sense of enjoyable emotions like pleasure, fulfillment, and so on are not annihilated, and it would be wrong to imagine a non-

metaphysical world as being bland and zombie-ish. It's easy to imagine a way of experiencing without any conceptual activity whatsoever that still contains enjoyable and not-so-enjoyable aspects. Judgment is the metaphysical attitude because it draws out a standardized scale of value against which the experienced thing is evaluated, and this scale of good/bad is coupled with the experience itself. The metaphysician takes the two as a one--so her evaluation of the experience exists within the experience itself, and its reality is as taken-for-granted as the existence of the phenomenal object. They are one and the same thing. With this orientation towards her concepts of value, the metaphysician easily imposes her evaluations on things (including people) without worrying about being nasty. Since she's arguing for the existence of a stabilizing and really real thing, it would be ridiculous for her to say, "Well, regardless of the reasons I have for liking this or that thing, at the end of the day it is only my own perspective, and others are equally valid." One wouldn't say something like that about the existence of a chair, or a fire in the house. Instead of the evaluations living inside of her--just being her own, relatively unimportant 'taste' on the issue--her evaluations live in the fabric of the universe itself.

One can see the same thread running through the more obvious examples of metaphysical thinking: the systems of early modern philosophy and the New Age authors of today (in other words, the "metaphysics" section of the bookstore.) In the case of the classical metaphysical systems, abandoned by more tough-minded and skeptical philosophers of recent times (such as John Dewey), the philosopher takes his speculations about reality as living in reality itself. (Now, there may be exceptions and objections to this idea, but as philosophers let's just consider the perspective had on these kinds of

things by, say, hard scientists. Instead of looking for evidence in the non-mental world, metaphysical philosophers throw around their thoughts without going through the crucible of verification, experiment, and fact-checking. It's irresponsible). Drunk on the mathematical wonder of the Greeks, systematic-metaphysical philosophers believed all they needed to do to gain knowledge was to think hard. Thinking-really-hard-about-something, when contrasted with other methods of investigation--like, say, researching history or conducting an experiment--looks ridiculous because it takes the bare mechanisms of conceptualization too seriously. New Age thought is the same way. An attempt to place, behind the physical quanta of reality, unseen and untouched substances like souls, the spirits of dead people, or "energy" that cannot be reliably demonstrated is an attempt to place concepts inside and underneath the world of phenomenal experience.

So how can we 'cash out' this worldview? What are the effects a metaphysical orientation has on everyday life? Concepts are static, while non-conceptual (or more-than-merely-conceptual) reality flows forward, constantly changing. For instance, the concept "2" remains the same throughout many empirical episodes, while the actual objects of experience that are grouped as two are constantly changing. Attempting to build a once-and-for-all representation of the world, a network of concepts that hold it all together, is like trying to build a concrete walkway while riding on a surfboard. When concepts--which emerge from the world as one type of evolutionary adaptation for one species of animal--are found to be constitutive of and inside the world, what is naturally loose, expansive, and slippery becomes static, hesitational and confined. If we can gain the right perspective on conceptualization, we will be able to cut down on many of these

hesitating stressors, which diminish and distract our appreciation of life. This change of perspective is towards the orientation I'm going to call mystical.

Where a metaphysical orientation sees concepts as inside and supportive of the world, a mystical one treats them as if they are 'on top of' reality--as secondary, and not strictly necessary for reality itself to function. As was mentioned earlier, a metaphysician sees reality as something that can be contained in concepts. We would do well to call a metaphysical approach to concepts a belief in "container-ness." Where this gets interesting is that in Buddhist philosophy (undeniably a mystical orientation), the name for the characterizing feature of reality is *sunyata*, which is usually translated as "emptiness." What is meant by the term is that reality lacks an essential, inherent existence--that things are less real and more dream-like than they seem to be. However, I think *sunyata* could be translated equally well as "containerlessness." The mystical orientation, understanding clearly that thoughts are only a piece and not the foundation of being, rejects their containing effect, which leaves reality free and open-ended—in other words, container-less. While a metaphysician hangs onto the reifying force of her concepts, the mystic relaxes it.

It is important to stress that the mystical orientation to concepts does not try to banish them or advocate any sort of relativistic, irresponsible lifestyle, where any and all moral principles are shrugged at. Concepts do not vanish in a transcendental burst of light; they are present in the same way that events in a dream are not disputed in their phenomenal existence after one has woken up, but the content of the dream is not taken quite so seriously. Thus, contrary to what most would expect, the process of

conceptualization still operates smoothly in a mystical orientation. With this being said, I will try to show some examples of how the orientation differs from the metaphysical one.

The first thing to note, because it is contrary to our expectations, is that mysticism removes explanations of experience rather than adds them. It is not a theory or proposition about the world, because the use of a relaxed attitude towards concepts is that you have no fixed position towards those kinds of things. It's interesting: the terms that usually reference any sort of investigation into the universe—usually “how” and “why”—are not present in the literature of mysticism. What are present are words that affirm no explanation but instead basic existence—in Asian philosophy, for instance, one is constantly hearing the mystical insight described as “suchness,” “this-ness,” or “that-ness.” This is because the mystical orientation dissolves the worries and preoccupations that come with an unhealthy fixation on the “how-nesses” and “why-nesses” of reality. With their relaxation/removal, the mystic has more open space to deal with, and reality is handled in a freer and less claustrophobic fashion.

Because of the this-ness of the mystical orientation, there are many more interpretations of experience that it is sympathetic to. Instead of metaphysical romanticism, which shies away from any hard look at truth, a mystical attitude towards concepts one is at peace with all forms of scientism, positivism and general tough-mindedness. The most cynical outlooks, such as misanthropy, atheism and reductionism, which assert themselves at the expense of all others, offer no threat to the mystic. While one usually imagines a mystic to hold all sorts of fishy, unverifiable ideas about the cosmos, which would break were she to converse with a more tough-minded thinker, “holding ideas” is the opposite of what a mystic does. Any traditional dichotomy of

tender-mindedness/tough-mindedness dissolves in a mystic orientation because for a mystic the dichotomy is itself relaxed and less serious. Because mysticism engages itself in firsthand, a-conceptual reality as its primary point of departure (and not any conceptual ground whatsoever), it is open and conciliatory to any conceptual formulations of the truth. The rejection of any “meaning of life,” for instance, (which is easily treated as a dangerous outlook by thinkers like Nietzsche) is easily assimilated by the mystic. Since metaphysical concepts are recognized as paper tigers, puffed up noise-in-the-head without any true substantiality, it is natural to treat “meaning” (which of course depends on a conceptual network to function--reference, symbolization, etc.) as puffed-up as well. “So what if there is no ‘meaning of life’?” the mystic asks. “Without it, I can still get up in the morning, still do things I enjoy, and still act the way I want to.” Concrete experience remains unchanged. It is likewise the case for any other especially tough-minded philosophical position. Without emotional investment in words and thought-networks, the mystic is free to consider any and all positions, regardless of their hardness. Scientific investigation itself relies on this orientation, not only because it is mainly concerned with empirical discovery and not after-the-fact conceptual refinement, but because it is unattached to any preconceived notions of what the truth may be. What is fun and engaging to the scientist are discoveries in direct experience, towards which concepts are used purely pragmatically.

The mystical orientation also increases one’s sense of humor. After all, how does humor work? (Not having time for any sort of detailed analysis, let’s just observe the very basics). If you watch the narrative structure of any kind of joke, there is usually a

conceptual clash between what is expected and what actually happens. For instance, observe your response to this particularly audience-friendly joke:

A teenage boy is about to take out a girl on a date. Nervous about what to say, he asks his older brother for advice. “There are three things you can always count on to make conversation about,” the brother says. “Family, food and philosophy. Ask her questions about any of those and you’ll be fine.” The boy is reassured, and takes the girl out the next night. Sitting at the restaurant in awkward silence, the boy remembers his brother. “So,” he asks the girl, “do you have a sister?” The girl looks up at him and says, “No,” then resumes eating. After another painful silence, the boy tries the second topic. “Well, do you like potato pancakes?” The girl looks up again at him, says no, and goes back to silence. Panicking, the boy goes to the last question his brother recommended. “If you had a sister, would she like potato pancakes?”

Regardless of how funny you found the joke, the mechanism of the punchline is relatively easy to spot. After first making up two bizarre and unrelated questions--about sisters and potato pancakes--one expects the trend to remain the same, and the boy to ask another completely unrelated question. The punchline relies on breaking the expectation, and showing us the past two topics of questioning reformulated into a third, nonsensical question. Our expectation and the actual event collapse into each other, and this collapse is the punchline of the joke. This sense of expecting something is roughly the same as all processes of conceptualization--one thinks one can contain or easily, intuitively predict and manipulate reality. When the mystic sees concepts as always running into each other, melting and blending together and never being held as far apart as they consider

themselves, the mechanism is the same. Mysticism and humor come from the same source.

It is with this sense of humor that one orients oneself to the aforementioned metaphysical categories of daily life--self, time, value, etc. One worries less about self, and there is less insecurity as well as no need for arrogance, since both indicate abnormal self-concern. There is simply the unconscious, natural form of self-confidence seen in most children at play. Being constantly wrapped up in the past and future is silly to the mystic since "past" and "future" are both conceptual formulations occurring in the present. They are tools, and not objects to be ameliorated themselves. And weighing the values of various things--always judging your experiences against a simplistic hierarchy, forgetting the multidimensional diversity of experience--is seen as obviously less important than learning as many methods as possible to enjoy whatever comes your way. Direct experience is always varied, shape-shifting, and unable to be pinned down in a one-dimensional structure. There are interesting things to see everywhere.

With regard to our normal set of philosophical categories, selfhood, time and value are only examples. There are a whole slew of them, of course: consciousness, mind, truth, beauty, etc. etc. Considering these are all the common subject matter of philosophy, one might say if we learn to take these concepts less seriously, and break out of their choppy effect on our experience, we necessarily bring an end to our philosophizing. Without a serious inquiry into such concepts, where can philosophy go? Here I think it is important to bring up two personal examples of the different orientations within philosophical history: Socrates and Plato. Plato is most known for postulating the existence of concepts in heavenly, static glory outside of our everyday experience--that,

beyond the imperfection and existence-preceding-essence of normal life, there are unchanging Ideas. In this sense, Plato is the ultimate metaphysician, and the philosophical method inherited from him is, indeed, in need of some melting and loosening. But to consider Socrates' orientation is to remember there is another way to philosophize. Instead of sanctifying conceptualization, Socrates sought to dissolve the conceptualizations of the Athenians, razing their conceptual networks through his dialectic until they could once again witness the world with the ignorance of infancy. This is the model we need to look towards in order to push philosophy back to its natural function.

Because more than anything, the mystical orientation is characterized by a peculiar sort of freedom. Without the distortions, illusions, and inhibitions of conceptual-seriousness, one finds there are less impediments to one's actions than one originally thought. The shackles we imagine are products of the reifying conceptual process of our own minds. Without any threats or disturbances from ideas one begins to develop a fully harmonized set of conceptual categories--in other words, one begins to come to a philosophical understanding. After all, if philosophy is concerned with an individual's relationship to particularly general, epic, and wide-reaching concepts, the mark of successful philosophizing is the ability to manage these conceptual networks with skill and beauty. And the main method to doing this, I have argued, is to loosen up and take the whole thing less seriously.