

Ecstasy: A Way of Knowing. Andrew M. Greeley. Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974.

Chapter ONE: A Beginning

According to the mystic, the experience is more one of *knowing* than of feeling.

He knows something that others do not know that he did not know before.

He sees, understands, perceives, comprehends.

Purpose of the book = to provide a *preliminary perspective* for the study and understanding of the mystical experience.

Assumption: the mystic must be taken at his word when he says that his experience is one of *heightened cognition*.

Traditional wisdom: mystics are to be respected, but mysticism is not the ultimate in religious behavior.

Contra the old psychotherapeutic approach: mystics are not lunatics.

Contra the new faddism: there is something to religion beyond mysticism, namely, *loving service*.

A sharp distinction must be drawn between 'mystic' and 'occult'.

"The powers thy mystic deals with are totally different from those the witch claims to be in touch with, and the experiences of the mystical and the occult are categorically different."

Charles Meyer: humankind seems to be on a pilgrimage from Antioch to Alexandria, from trying to explain all mystery and all problems to *being content with the exploration of mystery*.

We seek now not explanations/answers but *interpretations*.

"We are interested in symbols that will illumine the darkness cast by mystery, rather than formulae to sweep the mystery away. We want to plumb the depths of the mystery so that we can understand better. We no longer want or expect to understand everything. The universe becomes *sacred* again precisely because it is mysterious. It is now once again able to surprise us."

When 'mystery' is respected, mystical ecstasy becomes more important:

1. The ecstatic claims to have seen things the way they really are, to have penetrated to the absolute depths of mystery.
2. By virtue of his encounter with a realm very different from that most of us experience, the mystic confirms that there are other dimensions to life than our commonplace, commonsense, everyday technological world-view would be willing to concede.

“There are many levels of human knowing;” “There are strange and baffling things which the human mind is capable of encompassing.”

The experience of mystical union seems to be a relatively *constant* phenomenon; whether such experiences are noticed or not is probably a function of whether they are at any given moment culturally acceptable.

‘Mystical experience’ = “a feeling of intense unity with the universe and of one’s place within that unity.”

Research indicates that the capacity for transient episodes of ecstasy is widespread in the population.

“My purpose in writing this book is to present a pragmatic, skeptical, hard-nosed analysis of both the mystical experience and the mystical revival.”

“I believe that the capacity for ecstasy is part of the human condition.”

Chapter TWO: What Is the Mystical Experience?

William James sees four characteristics which mark mystical experiences:

1. *Ineffability*: it defies expression.

It is a state of feeling that *must be directly experienced* and cannot be transferred or imparted to others.

2. *Noetic quality*: the mystic has an overwhelming *experience of understanding*.

“Mystical experiences are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect” (James).

3. *Transiency*: cannot be sustained for long.

Though there is some kind of continuity between such experiences, when one is not immediately involved in the experience the thread of continuity seems lost.

4. *Passivity*: something besides the conscious, self-controlling reality principle is operating.

One may do many things to induce a mystical experience, but these are all by way of preparation; they merely put one in a state in which something else seems to happen, another power seems to take over.

Kenneth M. Bucke describes ‘a cosmic consciousness’:

1. “The person, suddenly, without warning, has a sense of being immersed in a flame or rose-colored cloud, or perhaps rather a sense that the mind is itself filled with such a cloud of haze.”
2. The ecstatic is possessed by joy, for he perceives that all things are well.
3. Experience of *intellectual illumination*: “Like a flash there is presented. . . a clear conception (a vision) in outline of the meaning and drift of the universe.”

The mystic knows:

- a. That the universe is not a dead machine but a *living presence*.
- b. That in its essence and tendency it is *infinitely good*.
- c. That *individual existence is continuous* beyond what is called death.

Abraham Maslow analyzes 'peak experiences'.

The most characteristic quality is that the *universe is perceived as an integrated and unified whole*; this illumination has a profound and shaking effect on the person's character.

B-cognition: he can see nature in its own Being (as an end in itself) rather than as something to be used or something to be afraid of or something to wish for or to be reacted to in some other personal, human, self-centered way.

"In the peak-experience, such emotions as wonder, awe, reverence, humility, surrender, and even worship before the greatness of the experience are often reported."

The dichotomies, polarities, and conflicts of life are transcended or resolved.

Transient loss of fear, anxiety, inhibition, of defense and control, or perplexity, confusion, conflict, of delay and restraint.

The person 'returns' more responsible, active, creative, loving.

"He has a glimpse of the way things are and is transformed by it."

[Cf. table 1].

Marghanita Laski analyzes 'triggers' of 'transcendental ecstasy'.

[Cf. table 2].

Dom David Knowles analyzes three ways of knowing God:

- ◆ Natural process of reasoning;
- ◆ Revelation;
- ◆ Mystical form of knowledge.

Mystical knowledge has three main characteristics:

1. Recognized by the person concerned as something utterly different from and more real and adequate than all his previous knowledge and love of God.
2. Felt as taking place at a deeper level of the personality and soul than that on which the normal processes of thought and will take place.
3. The experience is wholly incommunicable, save as a bare statement.

Convergence in descriptions: "It is a breaking away from everyday life and an instantaneous, fantastically powerful immersion into a transformed unity which illuminates the person, exalts him, and transforms him, at least temporarily. He sees things *the way they are* and finds himself in the possession of a power much greater than he, which overwhelms him with joy."

In a sense, *unexpected*.

Something powerful takes control of the personality.

Chapter THREE: The Psychology of Ecstasy

“The mystic state produces a release of energy from the unconscious which permits the actualization of man’s highest potentialities. Therefore, it seems proper that the mystic state be studied by science without prejudice in an effort to discover whether it may indeed offer clues to the good life, for the individual and for society.”

Arnold M. Ludwig lists ten characteristics of altered states of consciousness (ASC):

1. Alterations in thinking.
2. Disturbed time sense.
3. Loss of control.
4. Change in emotional expression
5. Body image change.
6. Perceptual distortions.
7. Change in meaning or significance.
8. Sense of the ineffable.
9. Feelings of rejuvenation.
10. Hypersuggestability.

ASC has three adaptive functions:

1. Healing;
2. New knowledge;
3. Social function (reduction of frustration, stress, and loneliness).

Ludwig’s ‘functional analysis’ provides interesting insights but is inadequate as a total explanation.

Arthur J. Deikman uses the concept of *deautomatization* to explain the mystical experience – i.e., in ordinary, daily life, the psychological processes by which we organize limits, and select/interpret the stimuli which we experience work automatically; in the mystical experience this automatization is ‘undone,’ and we begin to pay close attention to certain perceptual stimuli.

Deikman tells us how the senses operate in this alternate form of cognition but he does not seem interested in the cognition itself.

“The psychological study of mysticism will begin when psychologists are willing to concede the possibility that mystics may indeed know something about The Way Things Are.”

Mircea Eliade provides a social and cultural context for mysticism.

The religious experience and the mystical experience, which is the religious experience par excellence, are breaking-throughs to that which supremely *is*. That which supremely *is* exists in a different time frame from the ‘profane duration’ that is the pattern of our everyday life. Primitive rituals, which were always religious experiences and frequently ones of collective ecstasy, were attempts to become present in the great world-ordering events which marked the Beginnings.

The ecstatic experience is an attempt to recapture a Great Time, or primordial time, or mythical time by breaking away from the present time.

The ecstasy reactualizes, for a time, what was the initial state of mankind as a whole.

Summary: The mystical experience seems to be reasonably *common*. It involves a *breaking away from daily experience* of time and place and a search for some sort of *basic and primitive union with the Way Things Really Are*. While in its origins it was certainly religious, it need not be religious for the people today, in the sense that it need not have a special theological or denominational context. However, in its attempt to come to grips experientially with the Way Things Really Are, the mystical interlude is *implicitly and fundamentally religious*. It may look like certain forms of mental illness, because when it occurs the boundaries between self and the rest of reality are blurred and because the ordinary state of consciousness is temporarily replaced by something much different. It is usually *triggered* by some sort of experience of goodness, truth, beauty, or pleasure that apparently predisposes the person for the mystical event by taking him mind off ordinary events and making him temporarily *passive so that 'reality may rush in'*. when that rushing in occurs, the person has the sense of being *seized* by something 'demonic' (in Rollo May's sense of something that takes control of the whole personality). Peace, joy, union, insight, love, confidence seem to take possession of the person. If the context of the experience is Christian, there also seems to come a reassurance of *personal survival*; if the context is Eastern, the dominant impression may be one of *union*, of being merged with a great cosmic reality. Finally, the ecstatic 'comes down' from his moments of rapture with new *serenity and confidence* for his everyday life.

Chapter FOUR: Mysticism and Creative Experience

The mystical insight is a natural (though not ordinary) way of knowing.

Everyone may have the capacity for such insight, though many will probably never experience it.

Ronald Shor writes of 'the *generalized-reality orientation*' which is characterized by 'the mobilization of a structured frame of reference in the background of attention which supports, interprets, and gives meaning to all experiences.'

In a trance state, the GRO has faded into unawareness; in the trance state:

1. Experience cannot have their usual meanings.
2. Experiences may have special meanings which result from their isolation from the totality of general experiences.
3. Special orientations or special tasks can function temporarily as the only possible reality for the subject in his phenomenal awareness as a result of their isolation from the totality of general experience.

A good mystic is one who can suspend his generalized-reality orientation and concentrate on something else.

For the mystic, the specialized orientation 'rushes in', takes possession of them, and excludes for at least a few brief moments the generalized-reality orientation.

The *creative process* is an appropriate analogue for the mystical experience.

“Creative process” = that process of mind by which the musician perceives the entire symphony before he begins to work, etc.

Jacques Maritain suggested that the agent intellect is at work – “the restless, roving, energetic, prowling, suspicious, intrigued, curious, sensitive capacity of the mind that is driven to seek out reality.”

Leonard Kubie writes of the ‘preconscious intellect’, where images and symbols frolic and dance, forming and reforming patterns.

“In the preconscious intellect one is constantly shuffling, sorting, arranging and rearranging the various images and symbols that have been absorbed from one’s life experience. In dreams, trances, and the creative process, the workings of the preconscious intellect are permitted to come into consciousness, and one becomes aware that at some level of the personality one has perceived connections and linkages that had never been noticed before.”

I.e., there are many *levels of human cognition*, some of which are not ordinarily conscious; when one of these levels becomes conscious, one has the experience of being ‘taken possession of’ by an outside power – and in a way one has been, because a communication link has been set up between the outside world and the deeper processes of the personality of which the conscious intellect is not normally aware.

A more powerful and more basic form of *knowing* has begun to operate.

“Once one concedes the possibility that there may be intuitive, nondiscursive forms of knowledge, then one must logically accept the possibility that the mystical insight is indeed a way of knowing. And if it is a way of knowing, then what the mystic knows – or claims to know – becomes a matter of prime importance.”

Chapter FIVE: Ecstasy as Knowledge

The mystical interlude is the result of some special and unusual process that goes on within the human personality and need not require any external *special* divine intervention.

It is an experience not at all rare or extraordinary, but is fairly commonplace in the human condition.

“That it is viewed as extraordinary, esoteric, bizarre, and perhaps psychotic in the North Atlantic elite culture may only be evidence of how far that culture has drifted away from understanding the basic elements of the human condition.”

Like all other forms of human knowledge, the ecstatic experience is a means whereby man understands the world of which he is a part, but it differs in being a more direct, immediate, and intuitive form of knowledge.

Mystical rapture is the joy that comes from this particular form of contact with Reality.

The great heresy of the contemporary Western world is that the only kind of knowledge that is to be taken seriously and trusted is discursive, cognitive knowledge, that which is acquired by man's practical or technical reason.

We have all been influenced by this assumption: "In a culture without silence, where only technical reason is valued, where the educational system conspires to turn everyone into a prosiest, and where the mystical interlude is equated with mental illness, it is not easy to be an ecstatic."

There are at least four kinds of human knowledge:

1. Cognitive/rational/*discursive*: science, technology, common sense.
2. *Metaphysical* : observed the conventions of discursive knowledge, the language of prose, the laws of logic, and the methods of rational discourse, but is concerned with ultimate rather than proximate issues.
3. Mythopoetic: concern for the ultimate and for the hard data of human experience expressed in pictures, images, rituals, stories, and symbols.
4. Mystical:
 - Concerned with the ultimate.
 - Does not deal with the laws of discursive reasoning.
 - Comes into contact with the hard data of external reality.
 - Daimonic – takes possession of the whole personality.
 - Immediate – needs neither logical nor symbolic representation.
 - Passivity – the Real 'rushes in' without intermediary tools.
 - Inevitably religious – experience of The Way Things Are.

"When the personality of the person experiencing the ecstasy is not predisposed to strong conviction or inclination to believe that life is absurd, capricious, or evil – the ecstatic experience reveals *graciousness*."

In the face of clear evidence that mystical knowledge and rapture are "*boundary-breaking*" experiences in which unity of the person and the cosmos is experienced, why do psychologists term it pathological and not 'adult', since the blurring of the lines between self and Reality is a phenomenon of early childhood?

But are there really sharp boundaries between the adult human person and the rest of reality, or are these boundaries artifacts of hypercultivated, hyperdiscursive technological man? For if we pull back from our own presuppositions long enough to look at man in the world, it becomes clear that he is very much a part of the ongoing life processes of the cosmos.

It should not be impossible to combine highly developed self-consciousness with a reverent attitude to the life processes in which one is immersed; but it must be confessed that at this stage of evolution, the human race does not seem able to effect such a combination.

In fact, man is inextricably *enmeshed in the universe*. It is the beginning of wisdom to understand this fact; it is the beginning of mysticism to enjoy it.

In the mystical interlude the person consciously experiences his intimacy with the cosmos.

The Christian and the Jew have always believed that Reality is a *Thou* and that what is encountered in the ecstatic rapture is not merely a Life Force of an Ultimate Reality or the Ground of Being, but an *Other*.

The mystic's co-natural knowledge is direct and immediate and absorbs the whole person, taking possession of the body and the spirit without the need of such intermediaries as propositions or symbols.

In the ecstatic interlude the person does not so much admit into his being the forces which swirl around him and the Force which underpins them, he rather *acknowledges* their presence.

The *triggers* of the ecstatic experience can be viewed as signals which remind the person of his co-naturality with the universe.

"Triggers sweep away the distractions, the troubles, the anxieties, even the activities of the rational world, and leave man temporarily passive in the grip of Being and hence predisposed to experience, albeit transiently, the power of Being revealed totally and directly."

Every man has some kind of mystical capacity, but for reasons of heredity and environment these capacities are unevenly distributed in the population.

God need not make any special intervention to become present in our lives, because in fact he is there all the time. The ecstatic interlude simply recognizes his presence.

From the point of view of the Yahwistic religious tradition, there is no doubt that the Immanent Reality is also the transcendent Yahweh. The Yahwist differs from the nonbeliever in his definition of what it is that is encountered, not in the fact of the encounter.

"The transcendence of Yahweh symbolizes the fact that the universe has a purpose beyond itself and that that purpose is supremely gracious. The reality of the universe as we experience it is a blend of absurdity and graciousness, with neither seeming to have ultimate domination over the other. Yahweh symbolizes the fact that in the long run graciousness does triumph over absurdity, love over hatred, goodness over evil. The transcendence of God in the Yahwistic symbol system serves principally to underwrite the Yahwistic conviction of the triumph of graciousness. So when the Yahwistic mystic asserts that that which he experienced as immanent in himself and the physical universe is also the God who transcends creation, he is merely asserting his belief in an ultimate graciousness which underwrites the triumph of good over evil and life over death – if not in this universe, at least somewhere, somehow, some way."

There is a convergence between what the mystic reports about the reality he has encountered and what the twentieth chapter of Exodus reports of the Hebrew religious experience in the Sinai desert.

Chapter SIX: Mysticism and Madness

The unity the mystic grasps in his interlude of insight is best compared with the powerful, compassionate, absorbing unity of *human love*.

Mystics are basically saying that love is at the core of the universe; in those periods when we are 'in love' we perceive, dimly perhaps, the possibility that this powerful unifying emotion might be the very stuff out of which the universe is made.

What most of us have at least occasionally suspected might be the nature of Reality, the mystic claims to have experienced directly.

Faith and the mystical experience are closely related phenomena: the ecstatic sees the same things the believer does but much more dramatically and immediately. Both leap beyond discursive reasoning; both perceive love at work in the universe; both have confidence in peace and joy as the result of their insight; the convictions of both are totally inexplicable in the categories of positivist empiricism.

All mystics report a tremendous *burden* as well as tremendous joy in seeing things The Way They Are.

"Dark night of the soul" – in a sense results from the inability of the mystic to sustain his vision and to live up to it.

If a personality is not reasonably healthy, a mystical experience may be enough to unhinge it completely.

Certain kinds of neuroses (particularly obsessive-compulsive) exclude the possibility of mystical experience. Others do not inhibit such experience and may even predispose persons to them.

For such persons the clarity of vision of a mystical insight may indeed push them over the brink into schizophrenia, but it does not follow that mysticism and schizophrenia are the same thing.

Not all experiences of love are necessarily positive or healthy; if love is such a multivalent phenomenon when the object loved is of the same order of being as the lover, the possibilities for strange behavior are multiplied many times when it is a cosmic loving force that one feels one is possessing and being possessed by.

Ergo, the overtones and raptures can be dangerous to a weak or poorly structured personality.

But in a reasonable well-balanced personality it seems that a mystical interlude promotes personality development.

Chapter EIGHT: Ecstatic Politics

Since the Yahwistic tradition believes in a God of history and an Ultimate Reality working out its plans not merely in cosmological processes but also in the processes of human interaction, it is very easy for that tradition to accept the notion that mysticism may be relevant to social and political affairs.

In that tradition, political mysticism often takes the form of millennialism (the belief that the thousand-year reign of Jesus and his saintly followers, mentioned in the Apocalypse, is about to begin) in Christianity, and 'messianism' in the Jewish mystical tradition.

It is particularly in times of acute *social disorganization* that millennialistic leaders find a ready audience for mystical prophecy.

"The millennialistic prophet sees a vision of the old virtues being restored in the beginning of a New Age; he promises stability and virtue in a time of confusion and corruption, and he promises it with absolute certainty. Small wonder that people rally to his cause."

It is but one step from seeing a vision of unity and love to reaching the conclusion that the unity and love ought to be realized in the everyday world. If the everyday world is disorganized and evil enough, one can take the next short step and conclude that indeed the unity and love one has perceived in a mystical interlude will be realized. And it is yet another short step to decide that if the world will not cooperate in the implementation of one's mystical vision, then one will rally a band of saints to impose that vision on the world whether it wants it or not.

The combination of mysticism and democratic politics will work only when the person is sophisticated and self-possessed enough to know that his mystical vision and his political behavior operate on different levels of his being.

In the late Middle Ages, there developed a situation in which 'mystic-madmen' believed that once they had established direct contact with God, political and religious intermediary institutions were no longer necessary; the next step was to realize that it was God's will that these established orders were corrupt and ought to be destroyed. [E.g., Thomas Muntzer.]

In politics, as in everything else, a mystical vision can illumine, create, and direct; but if it happens to the wrong person at the wrong time, it can be terribly destructive both for himself and for all around him.

Persistence, patience, endurance, dedication, confidence – these are all qualities of the mentally healthy mystic that will stand him in good stead if he happens to be a politician.

Chapter NINE: Mysticism and Faddism

Any culture that ignores and deprecates mystical capabilities will be successful only so long as the payoffs it produces from its own perspectives are such that the price paid for ignoring the mystical dimensions of our own lives or of the human condition is acceptable.

In reaction to the scientific mentality of the West some critics (e.g., Roszak, Brown) glorify irrationality.

"At one time the churches had to defend the sacred, the otherworldly, the contemplative against the attack of scientific reason. Now they must defend human reason against the attacks of those who have discovered the sacred and the superstitious once again and who are busily engaged in the process of trying to become pagan mystics."

Two cultural phenomena are absolutely critical in our time:

1. *Personalism*: the strong and emphatic insistence that man lives not for some otherworldly happiness or for the service of the state, party or people, but for his own personal development, enrichment, and fulfillment.

“Personalism has become one of the unquestioned criteria by which other ideas, thoughts, and symbols must be evaluated and judged.

2. The death of the gods of the Enlightenment.

When it became apparent that science and discursive reasoning could not guarantee human liberation and personal fulfillment, personalists began to look for a ‘new model of salvation’ that will give them hope that man indeed may be liberated from the chains that separate him from his fellow man and the rest of the physical universe.

Catholics finally succeeded in cutting themselves off completely from their own mystical traditions just at the time when the North Atlantic cultural elites rediscovered with vengeance the mystical capabilities of the human personality.

‘Trendy’ mysticism is thus likely to become a ‘fad’ in the church for those who are desperately looking for solid ground on which to stand.

“Mysticism is no answer to religious doubts, much less a cure for immaturity and shallowness.”

“When we had confidence that a liberal, scientific, optimistic, rational humanism could create a paradigm here on earth, there was no particular reason to think it important to try to ‘break through’ to paradise in an interlude of ecstasy. But now that we know that Enlightenment humanism, with all its tools and tricks and skills, cannot build paradise for us, we will begin to explore again that paradise which is both inside and outside of us and which promises yet more to come.”

Chapter ELEVEN: Mysticism and Christianity

William James concluded that maybe we should believe the intuitions of mysticism and maybe we should not, but at least we should not reject them out of hand.

But it is difficult to be satisfied with that suspension of judgment in the face of ecstatic experience: either it tells us something that is extraordinarily hopeful about the universe and about human life, or it is one more cruel joke being played by a Reality that is not only capricious and random but ultimately malign.

“Ultimately one must choose: one must make an act of faith either for graciousness or malignancy and live one’s life as though one or the other were true. (And most agnostics I know are cautious, hesitant hoppers, at least half expecting a pleasant surprise at the end.)”

There is a strain, a predisposition in the ecstatic experience toward hopefulness, indeed overwhelming hopefulness, a hopefulness that is latent in the structure

of human existence. Whether we choose to be brave enough to accept that hopefulness or cynical enough to dismiss it as wishful thinking is something that each of us must decide for himself.

Christian mysticism involves neither a withdrawal from the self nor from the world: Yahweh *cares*, he is involved with his people, he carries on a love affair with his creatures, he is working out his grand design of salvation in the course of human events.

The goal is not so much the loss of self in the mystical encounter as it is the transformation of the self for its return to even more vigorous involvement in Yahweh's work in the world.

The Christian tradition is one of *activist mysticism*.

The mystical experience is not the decisive and distinctive religious activity in the Christian tradition. The Christian is concerned with the coming of the Kingdom of God, with the proclamation of the Good News.

"Mt 25 enjoins the Christian to *loving service*, not religious experience and not mystical ecstasy.

"A religion without mysticism would be as un-Christian as one without anything else but mysticism."

The Churches must insist that solitude and quiet, tranquility and serenity, reflection and contemplation are absolutely indispensable characteristics of the human life.

The Gospels tell us about two ecstatic experiences of Jesus:

1. Baptism by John, when he saw fully what his vocation was to be.
2. Transfiguration, when he saw that it was necessary to go to Jerusalem to die.

Jesus was an ecstatic and his experience gave direction and purpose to his life and ministry.

"The Christian knows that the universe is animated by love without having to have immediate and direct experience of that love. He is committed to living a life that reflects such love. If he experiences the love that binds the universe together, so much the better. Such an experience will fuel the flames of his own commitment to loving service. He does not reject mystical ecstasy; he does not expect it; he is grateful for it. If he does seek it out he does not do it in such a way as to interfere with his loving service to others."

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