

DISCUSSION

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Dr. Prince and Dr. Savage's admirable paper has persuasively set forth the good grounds that we have for seeing mystical states as, at least in some sense, a return to the state of early infancy. Furthermore, they have suggested that this regression may be a wholesome one which may serve the ego to strengthen it. I have often wondered at the neglect, by psychological medicine and by any colleagues interested in the psychology of personality, of such a rich source of intense information about the human spirit that a careful study of religious experience may yield. What little attention mysticism has received, particularly if we omit the writings of C.G. Jung, has come mostly from Freudians who have assumed that when they pointed out similarities of mysticism to early infancy they have sufficiently damned this intense form of human experience.

And yet history is full of the accounts of mystics and converts whose intense and immediate experience of what in various ways they have described as Ultimate Reality has transformed and energized their lives. Socrates, Moses, Isaiah, Buddha, Jesus, Paul, Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Avila, George Fox, Pascal, William Blake, Balzac, Walt Whitman, R.M. Bucke, and Arthur Koestler are just a few. If we can take it as demonstrated that mystical states involve regression, at least in some sense, we still need to ask the question, why? Is it not something of a paradox that a return to a more primitive state should so often result in what appears to be a moral, spiritual, health-producing advance? Furthermore, why should religious experiences, which by the very reason of their intensity are bound to be of short duration, often make such a difference in the subsequent life of the individual? Perhaps I should interject here the acknowledgement that whole-some results are not invariable, as Drs. Prince and Savage have already indicated, but we still have to account somehow for the frequent examples of those that are.

I regret that my suggestions are so largely speculative almost to the point of irresponsibility, but I can only plead that the poverty of studies of the mystical states, certainly of an empirical nature, leaves me no other alternative. I will cite studies in contingent fields where they may be relevant, whenever I can. My comments will be addressed chiefly to this problem of how change, particularly constructive change, can occur.

It is quite obvious that, for any change of personality to take place, there must be a certain measure of lability on which the change depends, and the greater the change, the greater the lability or possibility of change. Have we any reason to believe, then, that regression will increase lability or impressionability? *A priori* we should expect, if regression is truly a return to childhood or infancy, this would be the case, for children are proverbial for their impressionability: as the twig is bent, the tree is inclined. Furthermore, it is well known that often a trauma in childhood or infancy forms the basis for a neurosis that will leave its mark for a lifetime. A terror may be of only a few seconds' duration. Any psychiatrist knows that frequently it is only an excitement of equal intensity that has any chance of mitigating the original trauma. Also it is well known that mystical experience is the most intense known to man, surpassing even orgasm, if we can read rightly the words of those who try to describe mystical experience to us.

We might recall in this connection that Pavlov, in his work with dogs, discovered that under states of severe excitement, frightened dogs will arrive at a stage where their temperament may be fundamentally changed and will attack attendants previously loved and love those they had formerly disliked. There is an instructive discussion of Pavlov's findings, related both to psychotherapy and religious states, in William Sargant's *BATTLE FOR THE MIND*. (1) If fear can produce a state of extreme lability, why not the joyful ecstasy of the mystic as well?

There is no reason why the physiological condition of the organism may not play a part here as well. We know that emotional states will activate the endocrine glands and very quickly alter the chemical composition of the blood. This doubtless affects the nervous system in such a way as to make changes more likely. The speculation here is supported by what we know of the psychedelic drugs, which have triggered both mystical experiences and personality changes at the same time, as has been pointed out. I know of a group of convicts in prison where these drugs seem to have influenced some of the group strikingly for the better. More knowledge of the biochemistry of the psychedelics will doubtless throw further light on these problems.

Another advantage of regression is suggested by what educational psychologists speak of as the "most favored moment" for learning. In other words, there is a best stage in the development of the individual for learning certain skills which, once gone by, does not return. I remember that a number of years ago, after a considerable struggle with the German language, I went to Germany and was amazed to discover every urchin on the street not only

handling this difficult language in his play but uttering the words with faultless pronunciation, a feat I would never accomplish if I put years of study into it. The reason is that my favored moment has gone by—unless indeed I can regress and become again “like a little child.” This reminds me of a language student who claimed that, under LSD, she found it much easier to acquire the accents of the Spanish language she was studying.

This brings us to a special case of the favored moment for “imprinting” in animals. It has been suggested (by Dr. Timothy Leary and his associates) that some of the effects of the psychedelic drugs may be explained by this phenomenon. In a recent issue of *SCIENCE*, Eckhard H. Hess (2) tells of the research of Konrad Lorenz, who found that newly-hatched chicks formed an emotional bond to the first moving object they saw and would follow this (though it might be a human being or even an inanimate object) in preference to their own mothers. The suggestion is that the psychedelics produce a regression to the point where imprinting is once again possible and radical changes of cathexes produced.

One other possible mechanism may be briefly mentioned. Drs. Prince and Savage spoke of the case of Poincare when, after he had worked hard over a problem, the solution came not when he was struggling with it but when he was in a semi-relaxed state in bed. This reminds us of Kekule and the benzene ring and also of the fact that mystical experiences cannot be forced but must be waited for, even though it is true that in some ways they must be prepared for too. In Carlyle's *SARTOR RESARTUS* Teufelsdorck's transformation comes through a struggle for religious faith and sanity, described as the Everlasting No, then relaxation in the Center of Indifference, followed by the involuntary mystical experience on the top of a hill, which he calls the Everlasting Yea. The Center of Indifference, or “excellent passivity,” as Carlyle calls it, suggests the blissful relaxation of the infant, certain that he is safe and will somehow be taken care of. Along with this, apart from any special biochemical influence on the neurones, would go the freer interchange of ideas, conscious or unconscious, which relaxation normally brings, including the freedom to regress to an earlier stage of development, as noted in the paper.

If these are some of the possible mechanisms operating by reason of regression to facilitate change, what are some of the positive factors that explain regression “in the service of the ego” as opposed to regression of a more malignant variety?

I think it is quite obvious that regression can never completely reinstate a previous condition, no matter how perfectly it seems to

be approximated. In the first place, the individual carries back with him the capacity to reason, and despite the fact that the mystical state is nonrational in character, reason is bound to play a part in what one does with what appears to be the illumination of the state. Reason, then, is an asset which, interacting with the nonrational state, may help the individual to use the experience in a more directed and integrated way.

Other assets that the regressed individual takes with him are the conceptual frameworks consisting of ethics, cultural determinants, ideals, particular religious forms, and other conceptions that largely constitute the furniture of the superego. A person who has felt guilty about his unfaithfulness to his wife is apt to find that a mystical experience will improve his loyalty. A Christian mystic, like Eckhart, as both Suzuki (3) and Stace (4) have pointed out, seems to have had an experience very similar to that of Buddhist mystics psychologically, yet the conceptual language in which the experience is described will be Christian in the case of one and Buddhist in the case of others. It is, then, these frameworks that will influence the expression or the “fruits” of the experience, and they are potential sources of great positive value.

Another positive source of value would seem to be the deeplying intention of the individual who regresses. I do not want to get into the perplexities of a discussion of whether or not one has freedom of will. All we can say is that the appearance is that, at least in limited areas, he does, and even those dogmatically dedicated to the proposition that there is no such thing act in their daily lives as if the will made a difference. At any rate, we can speculate that the will, or something suspiciously like it, operates to explain the difference between regression as an escape and as an instrument leading one to a new beginning. Even in the Middle Ages it was recognized that mystical states were of two varieties, for it was always questioned as to whether the experience were of God or the Devil. But it seems clear that for those who wish to escape from their obligations the mystical state constitutes a means by which it becomes possible so that it may be said that mystical experience always carries a potential risk of psychosis. This may help to explain William James' (5) conviction that “in the psychopathic temperament we have the emotionality which is the *sine qua non* of moral perception” and the “love of metaphysics and mysticism which carry one's interests beyond the surface of the sensible world.” Those sensitive enough to taste mysticism are often sensitive enough to fall into psychosis. But if the substratum of the individual's will and intention is wholesome, this would seem to be an additional factor acting beneficently on

the lability and flexibility that are the accompaniments of the regressive state.

As a special area for the operation of the will, we may also mention the value of discipline both before and after the production of mystical states. It is well known that the segregation of devotees in monasteries has for one of its purposes the *preparation* for the mystical vision through discipline and the *following up of the results* of the vision through continued discipline. The fact of backsliding in cases of conversion from the levels of idealism that are usually associated with mystical states is well known. Some kind of discipline is nearly always necessary to husband the best fruits of mysticism. Discipline is necessary whether regression has opened the way for mysticism or simply represents the desire of a regressed mental patient to learn to face his problems. It has been a matter of much interest to me how often those who ingest LSD with some purpose other than that of idle curiosity, either individually or in groups, have instituted some form of discipline to conserve the insights and benefits of the experience.

My last point I offer with considerable diffidence, since I am neither a philosopher nor a theologian, yet I think the issue should be raised, at least for the interaction of minds from different disciplines. Stace (6) notes that one of the reliable marks of the mystical state is not only a sense of the sacred and divine but also a sense of having come into some kind of immediate contact with objective reality. This, of course, is expressed in various ways, depending on the background and personal organization of the individual: "all men are one", "man and nature are one", "God is", "the Cosmos is mysterious and wonderful" are some of the ways in which this sense of reality may be expressed. Usually this apprehension is in positive terms, and it is not necessary to determine whether or not these insights are true, to remark that they are such as tend to give life a meaning and a liveliness it did not have before. I have known at least one case where a young man, who had been suicidal before, gave up suicidal ideas after a psychedelic experience of a mystical nature. I would suppose that philosophers and theologians are bound to take such data into account in formulating their ideas of the nature of ultimate reality. On his part, the psychotherapist, concerned as he is with orienting his patient toward reality, even though he is not equipped to pass any final judgment, must at times be tempted to ask himself whether the results may not suggest that the mystic, in some paradoxical way, in regressing toward infancy, may acquire a clarity of sight transcending that of sages who rely largely on their intellectual functions. Perhaps this is something of what Jesus

meant when he told his disciples that those who would enter the Kingdom of Heaven must become like little children. At any rate, the mystic's sense of immediate experience of God or Reality would seem to be another asset that helps to explain the amazingly creative transformations that often occur.

I would like to refer, in closing, to another facet of the mystical experience—or at least nonrational experience of the Divine—that often characterizes religious experience. This is what Rudolf Otto (7) refers to as the *mysterium tremendum*, that feeling of *awe-ful* majesty and overwhelming, terror-producing Power that sometimes overtakes the religious prophet. I am referring to the kind of experience that led Moses to remove his shoes before the burning bush because he was on holy ground. This sense of the *awe-ful* frequently is an experience encountered by those who ingest LSD. Using our concept of regression, this may be the re-instatement of the sense of helplessness and absolute independence (cf. Schleiermacher, ON RELIGION) felt by the infant in his early experiences after emerging from the womb. On the other hand, it may in part stem from the sense of some individuals that they tread a narrow path between redemption and psychosis. Otto also refers to the fascinating quality of this Power that makes one tremble. The writer of Hebrews (8) says that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. This is fearful enough if we confine ourselves merely to the implications for underived changes in our outward way of life. But, at any rate, Otto suggests that this ecstasy that so many covet is nothing to be taken lightly, or to be pursued by those with other than stout hearts and adventurous minds. If those of us with a sense of how radically our lives need to be changed to develop our full potentialities are willing to risk regression in the service of the ego, either for ourselves or for others, perhaps it is only a taste of the awful mystery and beauty of ultimate reality that can make this rebirth and new beginning seem worthwhile.

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