

Secular ecstasies

Ray McBride investigates the phenomenon and what it could mean for mainstream psychology

Ecstasy is not divine, but nor is it grotesque. It is a human experience. A moment in which consensual reality is overwhelmed by an unusual but rewarding sense of connection – between you and the world, your brain and your body, stimulus and stimulated. Such profound moments may be rare across a lifetime, but they may also be known by degree. And the meanings we attach depend on the lives we live. In other words, these peculiar joys are a facet of our biologies rather than our belief systems.

So what are the varieties of secular ecstasy and how do they interact with a diverse and digital world? Moreover, if the physiological triggers behind our modern ecstasies could be better understood, might they offer a way to undermine the negativity that grips a depressed mind?

questions

Are ecstatic feelings exclusive to religious events or can they be found in modern everyday life?

What kinds of modern intensifiers can be tested in laboratory settings?

resources

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Centre for Mindfulness Research and Practice: www.bangor.ac.uk/mindfulness

In 1961 literary figure and popular BBC intellectual Marghanita Laski asserted that ecstasies enjoyed by non-religious people in everyday life are identical to religious ecstasies. This claim is radically democratic: once you liberate such sensations from divine selection, you are left with a rarefied emotion served by a common psychobiology. Yet despite this, science seems shy of, ambivalent towards, or even contemptuous of the concept of 'everyday' ecstasy.

This article challenges the reticence of mainstream science by corraling research that resonates with Laski's original assertion. To do this we must first clarify what is meant by the intangible 'ecstatic' concept and place it within an overview of the field. We will then be able to consider findings from modern research that explore the role of these emotions in increasingly secular societies.

What is 'ecstasy'?

In the popular imagination, religious ecstasy has been associated with epiphanic conversion, visions, voices, possession, shamanic ritual, speaking in tongues and even zombification! In some cases, these experiences may be interpreted as symptoms of neurological or psychiatric illness (Buckley, 1981; Claridge, 2010). Secular ecstasy is also marked by unusual emotional experiences, but it is not generally considered pathological.

In line with philosopher Walter Stace's taxonomy of mysticism (1961), I conceive of everyday ecstasy not so much as a

profound loss of control, rather as a surrendering to an unusual experience involving one or more of the following:

- | intense joyful sensations, euphoria, rapture, elation;
- | feelings of unity and oneness with one's environment;
- | altered or detached perception of space and time;
- | a sense of profundity and release from mundane reality;
- | an ineffable yet rational experience.

Fathoming the unfathomable

The *Varieties of Religious Experience* by William James (1902) encapsulates his scientific study of the 'wild facts' of human subjectivity. This important work set the benchmark for the study of religious psychology for decades to come. It also anticipated much modern literature on the subject; for example, the similarities between spiritual and psychotic experiences, and that the cognitive labelling of physiological sensations influences one's experience of emotions.

Despite subsequent naturalist studies by James Leuba (1925) – who highlighted the apparent similarities between mysticism, meditation and drug highs – the scientific study of what was considered primarily a religious experience fell from favour with the ascent of psychoanalysis and then behaviourism. Neither Freud nor Skinner had much interest in religion; the former believing ecstasy to be little more than female hysteria and the latter dismissing religiosity as an agent of control.

Although anthropology and philosophy were growing more interested in mysticism, the ecstatic state was still firmly embedded in religious contexts. It fell to British intellectual, critic, novelist and CND activist Marghanita Laski to finally divorce ecstasy from religion.

Laski had written a fictional description of a numinous experience in her novel *The Victorian Chaise-longue*. At a party, a psychiatrist friend was moved to

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compliment her on her insights. Their conversation sparked her lifelong belief in the prevalence and accessibility of ecstatic feeling. For *Ecstasy: A Study of Some Secular and Religious Experiences* (1961) she devised a questionnaire that she worked through with participants over a three-year period. Her qualitative tome attempts a systematisation of the ecstatic phenomenon by comparing historical accounts and ideological contexts with the contemporary self-reports she collected.

At the same time, on the other side of the Atlantic, in Boston, psychologist Abraham Maslow was developing his idea of 'peak experiences' (Maslow, 1962). These moments are thought to contain a high level of joy, and are passive, spontaneous and playful; they foster a sense of fusion, and a loss of self and time. As such, they are virtually synonymous with the descriptors for secular ecstasy, as Maslow quickly recognised.

Maslow is famed for his 'hierarchy of needs' and initially conceived of peak experiences as being at the actualisation apex of this motivational pyramid. But, towards the end of his life, he reconceptualised the phenomena as being accessible to anyone in everyday life. He came to believe that there were a range of

peak experiences from the commonplace to the rare and profound. In other words, they are a normal part of human psychology.

Yet, despite the original interest in Laski's work and the ongoing interest in Maslow's other theories, ecstatic or peak experiences have been largely shrugged off by mainstream researchers – left to rust in the backwaters of transpersonal psychology or else devalued by countercultural exploitation.

Let sleeping gods lie?

One reason why I believe the ecstatic concept is worth salvaging is that epidemiological questionnaires in Britain and the USA have repeatedly supported Laski and Maslow's contention that everyday ecstasy is prevalent. For instance, Stange and Taylor (2008) reported that 80 per cent of their 487 respondents claimed to have had moments that fit the ecstatic descriptors outlined earlier. They questioned 246 undergraduate psychology students from a Canadian university as well as 241 anonymous online participants.

Respondents held a variety of spiritual beliefs, broadly representative of the country's religious profile. The authors sought to study the influence of religious or artistic disposition on interpreting profound emotional experience. They concluded that sacred religious and secular peak experiences are the same phenomena differentiated only by pre-existing schema and cultural context.

The concept of 'secular ecstasy' unites similar phenomena – peak, aesthetic and mystical experiences – and allows a diffuse literature to form a body of work describing common features. Unfortunately, due to its intangibility, few empirical studies of everyday,

secular ecstasy currently exist. I do not mean to suggest that existing qualitative research lacks rigour or validity; rather that, for various reasons, only replicable experimental designs will convince the scientific mainstream of ecstasy's legitimacy.

But perhaps the first step is to take this seemingly quixotic and exotic notion, and normalise it. To consider its relevance, its applications and benefits in everyday life.

Rhythm of life

William James observed that 'the gods we stand by are the gods we need'. In secular societies, the needs that were once served by religion are now met by other means.

Laski understood secular ecstasy as being triggered by nature (mountain scenes or rolling waves) and art (where 'art' means paintings, literature or classical music). Laski's contribution to wresting free unclassifiable but meaningful emotions from religious exclusivity is invaluable. But do we now need to broaden the scope of her triggers in order to better account for how ecstasy is experienced in the modern world?

The following (highly selective) survey of modern epiphanic studies will be grouped by two Laskian types – intensity and withdrawal ecstasies. Her respondents often associated intensity with light and upward movement and withdrawal with dark and inward movement. These distinctions are found across the literature – Maslow differentiates 'excited' and 'still' peak experiences; Fischer (1971) distinguishes the ergotropic (increased arousal) from the trophotropic (decreased arousal); elsewhere green and mature (Levin & Steele, 2005) or hyper versus hypo states have also been described (McCraty et al., 2009).

Intensity ecstasies

Candidates for modern-day intensity ecstasies might include:

- I The experience of chills while listening



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secular ecstasies

to music, whether in the nightclub or at the concert hall. Often this is accompanied by piloerection – when the hairs on the skin stand on end. ‘Deep’ listeners have identical skin conductance (a mark of emotional arousal) as religious ecstasies (Penman & Becker, 2009).

- I The integration of affect with cognition, as when the entranced video gamer exhibits speeded reactions (Glickson & Avnon, 1997). It is worth noting that correlations have also been found between video game play and lucid dream states, in which the person knows they are dreaming and is able to exert control over events (Gackenbach, 2006).
- I Absorption at the cinema, induced by: intensified continuity that fixes our gaze to the beat of the cut; quick tempo that focuses attention; event density that boosts the volume of arousing stimuli (Bordwell, 2002).

Common to all of these situations is the process of entrainment whereby one or more bodily oscillations (heartbeat, breathing, brain waves) is locked to the frequency of an external rhythm. In the 1950s, neurosurgeon Gray Walter showed that the brain was capable of entraining to external frequencies (e.g. strobing lights, rhythmic noises) and that this could produce a trance-like state. The synchronising of internal biological pulses with an external source may partially explain the sensation of exceeding the boundaries of the self and twining with the universe, which is common to most versions of ecstatic experience.

Conceivably, intensified entrainments might have the following neurobiological effects that could underlie accompanying ecstatic experience: rhythmic changes in respiration, heart beat and blood flow in the brain (Blood & Zatorre, 2001) producing an altered state of consciousness; the build-up and release of tension, accompanied by increases in adrenaline and dopamine respectively (these neurotransmitters are also activated by hallucinogenic drugs); and momentary synaesthesias in which, overwhelmed by sensation, separate senses melt into undifferentiated oneness.

Withdrawal ecstasies

In contrast to the above discussion of intensity ecstasies, withdrawal ecstasies find an easier and more verifiable correlate in meditation. Although poor standardisation dogs these experimental studies, across the breadth of the work a consensus can still be discerned. To an

extent, meditation findings mirror intensity hypotheses – but the effects are experienced in slow motion.

Increases in low-amplitude alpha and theta typically differentiate meditation states from simple rest. In particular, the literature tends to agree that most styles of meditation are initiated and sustained by focused attention. This form of absorption is accomplished by suppression of distracting thoughts, which seems to be modulated by amplified serotonin activity and characterised by an increased prevalence of alpha waves (often associated with calm alertness). It is suggested that successful thought suppression is rewarded by boosts of feel-good dopamine (Kjaer et al., 2002). Physiologists Aftanas and Golocheikine (2001) report that reduced thoughts and blissful meditative experiences both correlate with increased theta power (sometimes associated with benefits for creativity).

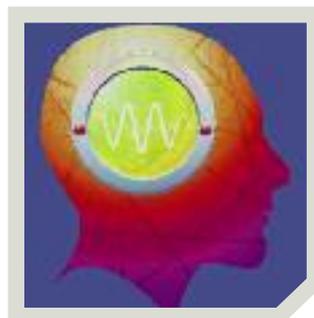
The combination of absorption and reduced thought-appearance appear to be active and rewarding ingredients in ecstatic experience. This implies that bottom-up affective sensation is more integral to the phenomenon than top-down cognitive engagement.

Internal-to-internal entrainment is commonly observed in meditating subjects where, for example, heart rate and respiration may coordinate or even interact with brain-wave frequency. Similarly, ideas of neural synchronisation (harmony) and coherence (stability) in low-amplitude alpha and theta bands may characterise integrated functioning and quieten cognitive chatter (Hebert et al., 2005).

Recently, new-age salesman Deepak Chopra has sought to capitalise on these insights by launching ‘Dream Weaver’ glasses; they claim to use rhythmic auditory and photic stimulation to induce a ‘meditative consciousness’. And herein lies the rub. The longer mainstream research ignores sublime positive emotions, the more they will be pawed at by those whose motivations may be less than scientific.

Taking ecstasies mainstream

When we strip away the ceremony, the cultural interpretations and semantic confusions, we are able to differentiate clinical from benign experience. Secular ecstasies have features that resemble



Euphoria and elation are associated with increased dopamine activity

psychiatric symptoms but they are in fact indicative of a healthy life and have beneficial effects on personality and creativity. Ecstasies exist independently of religion, and would have brought our ancestors evolutionary advantages in terms of motivation, reward and, ultimately, homeostasis.

One aspect of ecstasy highlighted in this article is the likely role of entrainment. Examples already exist of mindfulness meditation possessing beneficial effects; similarly rhythm-focused music therapy has many advocates for its successes in fields ranging from autism to cardiology to dementia. Whilst some studies have examined the role of audio-visual entrainment in the treatment of stress, anxiety and depression, more work needs to be done to verify outcomes and standardise protocols.

If the induced ecstatic experience is ever going to help nudge the stuck-in-a-rut brain out of depression, then science needs to shrug off preconceptions of mysticism and recognise the ecstatic moment as an innately human biological state. Seen this way, feelings of ineffability are driven by subcortical precognitive processes; feelings of unity by internal-to-external entrainment; a sense of profundity and release from mundane reality is related to a shift in cerebral dynamics; and euphoria and elation are associated with increased dopamine activity.

This article has sought to group marginalised research into profound emotions under the term – ‘secular ecstasy’ – by suggesting they are all describing aspects of the same thing. The hope is that by bringing these fragmented efforts together, a more convincing body of evidence may emerge. The risk, however, is that one creates a Frankenstein’s monster of sutured parts.

Nonetheless, exploring these ideas may help us expand our definition of consensual reality, improve the cathartic potential of our therapies and even entertainments, and innervate our understandings of what it means to be human. As Laski herself noted, ‘a rational explanation may prove at least as awe-inspiring as earlier interpretations’.



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