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# Mystical Experiences of the Natural World

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## INTRODUCTION

This evening I'm going to talk about a certain type of experience in which one feels united with the natural world or discovers some deep unity in the world. Let's look at a couple of examples. The first one, reported by a young man, took place in natural surroundings:

Suddenly in less than a second came this "feeling": a knowledge of oneness with ocean, sky, fish, birds, everything. The "feeling" was soon gone, but the impression remained ever since. It was not intellectual or emotional, but the feeling of certainty was there beyond all other feelings. I am surer of this than of anything else in life. It left a deep happiness which lasted for some hours. All was completely impersonal. "I was not there at all" is one way of expressing the "feeling". I have used the words oneness, happiness, certainty, and so on, but all are imperfect expressions – ludicrously so, of what I had experienced. At this time I had not read of mysticism, but later when I did, I was much interested to read of similar experiences. (From *Light of All Life*, Raynor Johnson)

Some phrases here refer to features that are pretty typical of the experiences:

- **'suddenly in less than a second'** The experiences often do come on very quickly, although there can be more gradual build-ups.
- **'a knowledge of oneness with ocean, sky, fish, birds, everything'** Oneness, unity, wholeness are very commonly reported, and in fact constitute one of the defining features of the experiences. It can be unity *with* or *between* specific things in the environment such as a rock, hill, flower, tree, insect, bird, rabbit, person, planet Earth, or indeed with the universe as a whole.
- **'soon gone'** Many experiences don't last for more than a few seconds or minutes, although on rare occasions they have persisted for days and even weeks and months, and perhaps in one or two reported cases they have gone on indefinitely.
- **'not intellectual or emotional'** The experiences are 'not intellectual' in the sense that they don't consist of everyday, discursive thinking activity – but note that they do typically have a very strong cognitive or 'noetic' component, bringing direct, intuitive 'knowledge'. As for the experience not being 'emotional', I think this might mean here that there was no great tumult or paroxysm of emotion. This is interesting

because it has sometimes been claimed that mystical experience is an essentially emotional state, the sort of thing that happens to hysterical contemplatives or the manically insane, but in fact the experience is very often a state of deep, calm, blissful knowing.

- **‘certainty’** The experience often brings tremendous certainty that a profound truth has been grasped or that reality has been contacted.
- **‘left a deep happiness’** A common after-effect, but note that it doesn’t necessarily last very long, as in this case, just a few hours.
- **‘impersonal. I was not there at all’** Transcendence of the everyday self is a very common feature, often involving the unitive feelings.
- **‘all are imperfect expressions’** Although the experience is clearly describable to some extent (knowledge, oneness, certainty, selflessness), it is felt that the words don’t properly convey what was felt. It has often been said that mystical experience is *ineffable*, but the sort of experience we are concerned with tonight is certainly describable to some extent, although there’s still something about it that escapes description, perhaps the sheer depth or intensity.
- **‘I had not read of mysticism’** The experiences aren’t confined to people who know about mysticism or have engaged in spiritual practices. They often come out of the blue, to persons who had no idea that such experiences occur.

Whereas this first example took place outdoors in nature, the second example occurred under very different circumstances, to a woman who was coming out of a coma induced by insulin. Again, this person had no previous familiarity with mystical literature.

It began with an overwhelming awareness that I *understood everything* about everything and that the Universe wasn’t complex at all, but beautifully, exquisitely, simple – although not, of course, describable in any terms that we know. I laughed with sheer joy at the “rightness” of it. ... And with the feeling that I had “come home”. It included the blissful awareness of unity, of being in all, all being in me. All this – I say “all” but really it was a single experience – merged into an intense and buoyant feeling of “Love”: I felt as though I were breathing love and had love coursing through my veins; and this persisted for some time after regaining full consciousness. (Vivien Gibson, from *Relevance of Bliss*, Nona Coxhead)

In this account, the ‘knowing quality’ comes through very clearly, the sense of access to profound knowledge, understanding, or meaning.

- ‘I understood everything about everything’
- ‘the Universe wasn’t complex at all, but beautifully, exquisitely, simple’
- ‘not describable in any terms that we know’
- ‘sheer joy at the “rightness” of it’
- ‘I had “come home”’
- ‘blissful awareness of unity, of being in all, all being in me’
- ‘an intense and buoyant feeling of “Love”’

Let me also draw your attention to a couple of other features in this list. First, the sense of *coming home*, as if this state is one’s natural condition from which one has been separated. Second, there’s an important feature that was not mentioned in the first account, namely *love*, an intense love that makes others seem very precious.

These two experiences, although they occurred under very different circumstances, clearly have some similarities, such as the sense of unity with the world and its contents.

## EXTROVERTIVE MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

What should we call these experiences? In the first place, it's convenient to call them 'mystical'. The word 'mystical' derives from the Greek, meaning 'to close', that is, to keep the lips and eyes sealed, to keep silent, and hence to keep secrets. Historically, it is associated with the Mystery Religions of Ancient Greece and Rome, in connection with the secrecy to which initiates were sworn and also with the secret meanings behind their practices. With the early Church Fathers, 'mystical' comes to mean the hidden meanings that can be found in the Holy Scriptures if one knows how to interpret them. In contemporary usage, 'mystical experience' often refers to experiences characterized by (1) profound, intuitive knowing, (2) a sense of unity, or (3) a sense of contact with reality, or (4) some combination of the above, although there is no consistency or agreement over the exact use of the term. Some scholars emphasize knowledge, others unity, and some contact with reality. Various types of mystical experience have been distinguished, and I list some here:

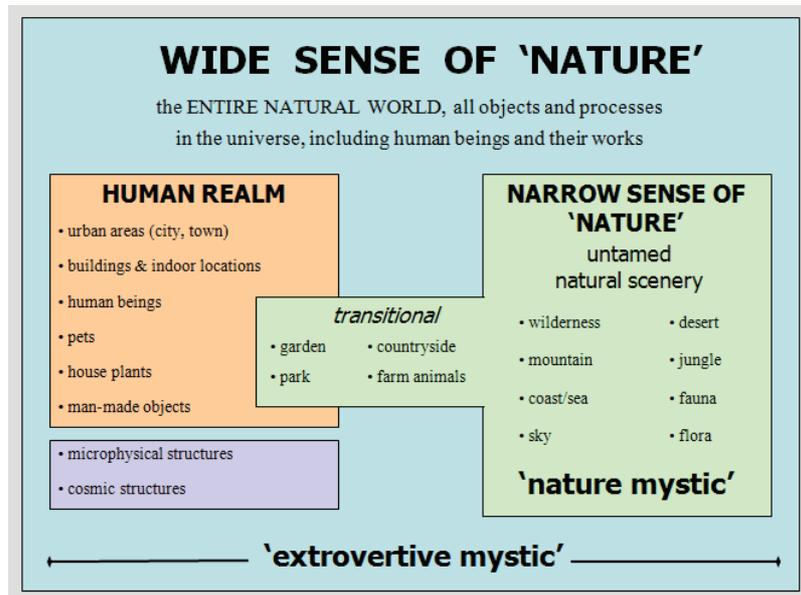
- Union with personal God (*theistic*)
- Identity with impersonal Absolute (*monistic*)
- Pure consciousness event
- Some visionary experiences
- Some near-death experiences
- Mystical experiences of the natural world

These experiences aren't necessarily distinct from one another, as there can be overlap. For instance, it's quite possible to have a mystical experience of the natural world that brings a sense of union with God as the creator of the world. And near-death experiences can bring cosmic unity. Given that various types of mystical experiences are distinguishable, we need a convenient name for the experiences we're concerned with here. These experiences have been called *extrovertive mystical experiences*, and this is the term I shall use here. It is mystical experience that is orientated or directed outwards to the natural world, and it is contrasted with inward-directed or *introvertive mystical experience*. This terminology isn't entirely satisfactory for reasons I won't go into here, but it's probably as good as any of the other names given to the experiences, all of which have their problems. Some of these alternatives are:

- Extrovertive mystical experience (W. T. Stace)
- 'Nature mysticism'/nature mystical experience
- Cosmic consciousness (R. M. Bucke, Edward Carpenter)
- Natural/panenhenic mystical experience (R. C. Zaehner)
- Unifying vision (Rudolf Otto)
- Oceanic feeling (Romain Rolland, Sigmund Freud)
- Unitive mystical state (Robert Forman)
- Objective mystical experience (W. R. Inge)
- Vision of dame kind / illuminated vision of the natural world

These terms aren't necessarily exactly equivalent, and some attention has to be paid to what is meant by 'nature'. 'Nature mysticism' and 'nature mystical experience' often carry the implication that the experiences take place amid nature and have nature as their contents, with 'nature' understood narrowly as unspoilt, untamed 'scenic nature', the wilderness, the

mountains, the coast, the sky, and so forth. I've represented this narrow conception of nature by the light green box in the right of the diagram:



It's in this sense that we often think of William Wordsworth and some nature writers as mystics, people who immerse themselves in the beauties of nature and find some spiritual regeneration there. A slightly broader meaning of nature includes places and animals that have been subject to extensive human shaping, such as the countryside, parks, gardens, and farm animals. The *nature mystic*, away from the untamed wilds, may still find some spiritual uplift in the park, the back garden, the allotment. But nature, as the 'natural world', can have a broader meaning still, encompassing the unambiguously human domains too, town and city, buildings, roads, railways and canals, shops, manufactured items, pets, and human beings themselves. In addition, the natural world includes those vast reaches of the universe that we don't ordinarily experience because they are too small or too large, the microphysical and the cosmic. 'Nature' or the 'natural world' in this widest sense is the arena and object of extrovertive mystical experience. Extrovertive experiences takes place not only amid scenic nature, but also in urban settings and sometimes in unpleasant surroundings, such as noisy industrial works and in hectic city scenes, and it can have a whole range of contents.

Having introduced the experiences, I'm now going to look more closely at them, focusing on questions that might be asked about them. First, what are extrovertive experiences like? So far I've mentioned a few characteristics, such as unity and knowledge, but I haven't gone into details. Second, how common are the experiences? How frequent are they in the modern world, and do they have historical parallels in pre-modern times? Under what conditions do extrovertive experiences tend to occur? Where and when do they occur? What happens to those who have the experiences? What are the immediate after-effects and the longer-term consequences? In what ways have the experiences been explained? What theories are available to make sense of them?

## PHENOMENOLOGY

The first question – what are the experiences like? What are their characteristics? To answer this, one has to study the experiences in detail, and to this end I questioned persons who have had the experience, drew on my own limited personal acquaintance with the experience, and

made a detailed study of well over two hundred accounts collected from many sources. Over the past hundred years investigators of mysticism and religious experience have been collecting testimonies, and there are now many available for study, to be found in anthologies, books on mysticism, biographies, journal articles, magazine articles. Probably the largest collection of testimonies is held by the Religious Experience Research Centre (RERC), founded by the marine biologist Alister Hardy at Oxford in the 1960s, and now located at the University of Lampeter, Wales. The Alister Hardy database, which holds over 5,000 testimonies and keeps on growing, includes some very interesting and detailed accounts of extrovertive mystical experience. Among the first 3,000 accounts in the database, perhaps about 5 to 10% could be classed as extrovertive mystical experience, depending on how exactly one defines the experience. So by analyzing accounts from various sources, including the Hardy collection, I was able to explore the characteristics, circumstances, and consequences of the experiences. I'll now run through these characteristics. Note that individual accounts won't describe all these features: some might mention just two or three, others might mention as many as seven, eight or more.

## Unity

Extrovertive mystics describe a variety of unitive feelings. They report that

- the world was an unbroken *whole*, with no gaps separating things (this I call 'integral' unity)
- they themselves were *parts* of this whole ('immersive')
- they were *identified* with the whole or some of its contents ('identificatory')
- they *contained* everything within themselves ('incorporative')
- they existed in a *community* of identity, consciousness and love with other beings ('communal')
- they observed unifying connections between things ('interconnective')
- things were united by deriving from a common *source* ('source')

The following account describes a few of these unities. A woman was relaxing at home, wondering how big the universe might be, when suddenly her consciousness seemed to expand through a funnel in the top of her head:

I suddenly realized that I was conscious of everything that is, and that **I was part of it all**. [immersion] Then I became aware of it from a different aspect. **I was everything that is**. [identification] It seemed curious at first, but then turned into a feeling of being very much alone. I thought surely there must be something or somebody outside of me, but I searched and searched and **could find nothing that was not a part of me** [incorporation]. (RERC 4764, *Seeing the Invisible*, Maxwell & Tschudin)

It's interesting that, in this case, unity brought a feeling of aloneness. The woman had become all things, and there wasn't anyone else outside this enlarged self. I've noticed this feature in a small number of accounts, and it seems that in these cases the mystic doesn't take the next step and discover the communal aspect of unity that some other mystics find, the discovery of a community of similarly conscious selves.

## Self

As we've seen in the examples, it can seem that one's everyday, individual self has relaxed or melted away, or that self has expanded to take in all things, that a deeper, inclusive self has been discovered. Clearly, if you find that you are unified with the world or its contents in some way, then your sense of self is going to change. Relaxation of the usual sense of self is not only a characteristic of the experience itself, but can be the path by which the experience comes about. By letting go of one self, one comes to a selflessness or to a profounder self.

## **Knowledge**

The next extrovertive characteristic in my list is knowledge, the so-called ‘noetic quality’ of mystical experience that William James emphasized. This can be, for instance, an *all-encompassing knowledge* or state of *omniscience*, or a *profound understanding* gives insight into the meaning of the existence, life and suffering. Mystics often find it difficult to recall what this meaning was, but they do sometimes remember *specific insights*, such as the realization of the unity, order, harmony, life of the world, and the supreme importance of love. A few extrovertive experiences have brought insights into spiritual evolution and reincarnation, and a fairly common insight concerns the ‘all-rightness’ of existence: *deep-down, beneath all the cruelty, horror, and stupidity in the world, everything is proceeding as it should and will turn out for the best*. From the perspective of ordinary consciousness, this is very hard to believe, but it does figure repeatedly in mystical accounts so perhaps there is something to it. I’ll give one example. Near the coast, a woman becomes identified with the birds, the sea and sky, like the young man in my first example:

Everything and I were the same, all one. It was the most peaceful and ‘right’ feeling imaginable and I knew without any smallest doubt that everything happened for a reason, a good reason, and fitted into everything else ... I was filled, swamped, with happiness and peace. Everything was RIGHT. (RERC 1239, *Seeing the Invisible*, Maxwell and Tschudin)

It seems that from the viewpoint of the perfected whole, in which all is understood and everything has been brought to completion, everything is well.

## **Love**

The next characteristic – love – has been rather neglected by investigators of nature mysticism, but love and compassion are undoubtedly a prominent feature of some extrovertive experiences. There can be a powerful feeling of love for other beings, and one can also feel deeply loved oneself.

## **Beauty**

The world can seem extraordinarily beautiful, even objects and places that previously looked ugly. Everything is equally beautiful.

## **Miscellaneous feelings**

Under miscellaneous feelings, I’ve included a variety of feelings or reactions:

Bliss, joy, elation, uplift, peace, relief, peace, gratitude, wonder, power, fearlessness, humour, surprise, insignificance, humility, unworthiness, awe, terror, discomfort with sheer intensity.

Notice that some of these are unpleasant or downright disagreeable. The intensity of some extrovertive features can be difficult to take, all that bliss, beauty, and grandeur, and also insights into one’s usual condition of self-centredness and love deficiency. Nevertheless, spontaneous extrovertive experiences are often pretty positive overall. Those precipitated by drugs can also be positive overall, although drug-induced experiences can be extremely difficult, with uncontrolled shattering of the ordinary self and all sorts of bizarre effects.

## **Time**

One of the most intriguing characteristics of extrovertive experience concerns change to the sense of time. An experience may last only a second or minute, but it can seem to endure for a long time or even have a ‘timeless’ or ‘eternal’ character. For example, a woman, lying down

on grass, felt the boundaries between herself and her surroundings melt away, and she became united with the earth, surrounded by a loving energy and consciousness:

Although the experience could not have lasted for more than a few minutes, it seemed **endless** – as if I were in some kind of **eternal** state of understanding. Then it passed and I remained still and quiet on the lawn, trying to absorb what had happened ... (Wendy Rose-Neill, *The Relevance of Bliss*, Nona Coxhead)

Sometimes, time seems to stop completely. Or if the flow of time continues, it may seem to do so in a harmonious fashion, as if the transforming world were a cosmic dance. The mystic can also feel that they have experienced the whole of time, past, present and future in one eternal moment of experience.

### **Reality/Realness**

The mystic feels that they experience the world as it truly is, in its unity, wholeness, life, eternity, love, and rightness. The experience itself also *feels* very real, far more vivid and clear than everyday sensory experience, which in comparison can seem shadowlike or dreamlike. In fact, the woman I just quoted remarked:

I felt as if I had suddenly come alive for the first time – as if I were awakening from a long sleep into a real world. I remember feeling that a veil had been lifted from my eyes and everything came into focus ... (Wendy Rose-Neill, *The Relevance of Bliss*, Nona Coxhead)

The experience is like an awakening, *an awakening to reality*. By comparison, in our everyday state of consciousness, we can seem like sleepwalkers, almost completely inattentive to the way things are.

### **Attention**

Related to the sense of realness is the heightened awareness or attention that often sets in at the beginning of the experiences. Again, I can illustrate this with a quotation from the woman's account. She relates that at the start of her experience

I gradually became intensely aware of my surroundings – the sound of the birds singing, the rustling of leaves, the breeze on my skin and the scent of the grass and flowers. (Wendy Rose-Neill, *The Relevance of Bliss*, Nona Coxhead)

### **Life**

This greater attentiveness can lead into the next characteristic I've listed, experience of the living or dynamic character of the world. Everything can seem intensely animated, to *be pulsating, vibrating, breathing with life, consciousness, energy*. Nothing in the universe is really dead or inert.

### **Presence**

Personal or impersonal 'presences' are occasionally reported in extrovertive accounts. I wouldn't say that this is a very common feature, but it is sometimes described. It can seem that a personal being is localized near by, not visible but its presence felt. More often, the personal presence is an all-pervading love, which is sometimes interpreted as the presence of God. When impersonal presences are felt, they might be described as a life-force or power or the reality that is being is revealed.

## **Vision**

The visual contents of extrovertive experience can take several forms. At its simplest, there is no change to visual experience. Alternatively, a bright light may completely obliterate vision of the surroundings, but the mystic may remain in touch with the world through the sense of unity and knowledge. Sometimes, this light fades but leaves enhanced visual perception of the environment. More often, extrovertive experience brings a special luminosity that is cloudy or clear and bright, but not totally obliterating. The following example is another coastal one, taking place on a cliff by the sea:

Although there was no mist, the light seemed suddenly white and diffused and I experienced the most incredible sense of oneness and at the same time ‘knew what it was all about’, it being existence. Of course, seconds later I hadn’t the faintest idea what it was all about. (RERC 322, *Seeing the Invisible*, Maxwell and Tschudin)

In this example, diffuse white light is accompanied by the sense of oneness and knowledge. Sometimes the mystic thinks that the light is external, located in the environment; at other times it seems to be in the mind of the mystic. White and golden colours are commonly reported, and red and blue colorations also occur, including pinks, oranges, purples and violets. Strangely, green light seems uncommon. A particularly dramatic form of extrovertive experience has visual contents of cosmic reach. One example comes from the New Age thinker and co-founder of Findhorn, David Spangler, who as a child of seven had a cosmic expansion. At one point in his experience, he sensed a loving presence that contained all things in oneness, and then he had a visual experience:

I had a visual impression of the universe, a great wheel of stars and galaxies, suffused with the golden glow of billions of suns, floating in a sea of spirit. It was as if I were seeing as this presence saw, and for one instant we were one. In that instant, it was as if I were one with everything that existed, every atom, every stone, every world, every star, seeing creation not from some great distance but from the inside out as if it were my very body and being. (David Spangler, in Robert May, *Cosmic Consciousness Revisited*)

## **Sound**

Whereas special visual features are very common in extrovertive experience, special auditory features are not so common. However, there is one effect that’s worth mentioning. Some accounts describe a silence that sets in as the experience begins. The noises of the countryside or the city - the chirping of birds, the roar of motor cars - fade away, and they only return as the experience comes to an end.

## **Body**

Body feelings or somatic phenomena include the sense that one’s body now contains all things, as in the David Spangler account. The cosmos is the mystic’s body. There can also be feelings of pressure or flowing energy in the human body, which can be linked with the notion of kundalini in Indian yogic systems. In fact, in some of these systems, it is said that when the latent energy in the body rises to the uppermost chakra, at the crown of the head or above, then consciousness expands to cosmic dimensions.

## **Fusion**

Under the heading ‘fusion’, I include synaesthetic-type phenomena, which are very occasionally reported in extrovertive accounts. Sensory qualities, such as colour and sound, lose their distinctness. Another sort of fusion is the merging of things like light, love, knowledge and life. Normally we make sharp distinctions between them, but in the mystical

experience they become much more closely related or even identified. The light is knowledge, the light is love.

## Paranormal

Finally, paranormal phenomena, such as telepathy, clairvoyance, and out-of-the-body experiences, sometimes precede or attend extrovertive mystical experiences. It's important to take note of this because scholars of mysticism have often tried to fence off the paranormal from the mystical, whereas in fact it's possible that they are quite closely related.

## OCCURRENCE

Let's move to the second question: how common are the experiences?

- How frequent are they in the modern world?
- Do they have historical parallels?

Because of time constraints, I won't attempt to answer this question now. I've addressed it in my book *Mystical Encounters with the Natural World*. I think that extrovertive experience has been with us for a very long time, for evidence can be found in the ancient world.

In one sense, extrovertive experience is a rare occurrence, happening only once, twice, or just a few times to those individuals who have them, although there are exceptions. In another sense, extrovertive experience is quite common, being fairly widespread across the population, at least of the USA and UK, where survey studies have been conducted.

Let me give you some figures:

### ➤ Andrew Greeley 1973 US study

19%	deep and profound peace
17%	certainty all things will work out for the good
15%	love is at the centre of everything
11%	great increase in understanding/knowledge
<b>10%</b>	<b>unity of everything and my own part in it</b>
<b>9%</b>	<b>sense that the universe is alive</b>
8%	sense of tremendous personal expansion
5%	bathed in light

In Andrew Greeley's 1973 national US survey of religious experiences, 10% of the total sample had experiences that could be described by the phrase '*a sense of the unity of everything and my own part in it*', a phrase suggestive specifically of extrovertive unity, as could be the next phrase 'sense that the universe is alive', at 9%. Other descriptors registered in the survey are also relevant to extrovertive mystical experiences, although some of them aren't specific to the experiences, such as the first one '*deep and profound peace*' and the last one '*bathed in light*', which can characterize other mystical and religious experiences. Although it would be unwise to draw any definite conclusions from this survey and others like it, one could say, rather tentatively, that in 1973 about 10% of the US population had some acquaintance with extrovertive unity.

In a 1987 UK survey into varieties of religious and psychical experiences conducted by David Hay and Gordon Heald, the following figures were obtained:

➤ Hay and Heald 1987 UK study

27%	awareness of presence of God
25%	receiving help in answer to prayer
22%	guiding presence not called God
<b>16%</b>	<b>awareness of sacred presence in Nature</b>
29%	awareness of patterning in synchronicity
18%	presence of someone who has died
12%	awareness of an evil presence
<b>5%</b>	<b>experiencing that all things are one</b>

The most relevant category here to extrovertive mystical experience is the last one, 'experiencing that all things are one', with 5% of the sample reporting this, but also 'awareness of sacred presence in Nature' at 16% (this latter figure had gone up to 29% in a repeat survey conducted for the BBC in the year 2000).

So for extrovertive unity, the US survey gave 10% and the UK survey gave 5%, which is roughly similar. Of course, it should be stressed that these survey studies do not tell us how intense the experiences were. It's quite possible that a fair proportion of those 10% and 5% had experiences that are very mild compared with the rather dramatic and intense experiences of unity that we find described in mystical accounts.

## CIRCUMSTANCES

Turning now to the third question: Under what conditions do extrovertive mystical experiences tend to occur? What sets them off? What triggers them? Extrovertive experiences take place under surprisingly varied circumstances. I'll run through some of these.

### Nature

In my study, the most common circumstance was nature, understood fairly broadly to include cultivated and domestic places as well as the wilds, ranging from mountain, desert, jungle and coast to countryside, parks, gardens, and even indoors. For instance, Kathleen Raine, the Blake scholar and poet, found herself unified with a hyacinth on her writing desk as she gazed at its petals:

I was no longer looking *at* it, but *was* it; a distinct, indescribable, but in no way vague, still less emotional, shift of consciousness into the plant itself. Or rather I and the plant were one and indistinguishable; as if the plant were a part of my consciousness. (Raine, *The Land Unknown*, 1975)

She was no longer perceiving the flower, but living it, experiencing its inner circulation of light and life. In this case, Raine had been gazing at a houseplant. In other cases, the experience has begun when people have looked at trees, crystals, rocks, mountains, water waves, sunlight, clouds, birds in flight, sunrise, sunset, and stars in the night sky, or just at a nature scene in general.

### A quiet state of mind

It's possible that some extrovertive experiences in nature take place because the natural surroundings have induced a quiet state of mind. It's often reported that extrovertive experience takes place when the subject is in a relaxed, quiet state, with thoughts subsided. *It seems that our everyday stream of thinking, often centred around ourselves, gets in the way of the experience, so any situation that calms the mind's incessant self-centred activity will*

*encourage the experiences.* This can be through exposure to nature or through some other calming or interrupting influence.

### **Concern, compassion, love**

Some other states of mind that can encourage the experiences are concern for others, and compassion and love. Reaching out to a person or animal that is suffering or struggling can be enough to spark off an experience.

### **Informal meditations**

Also thinking about certain topics can encourage the experiences. For instance, thoughts about the immensity of the universe have triggered the experience on more than one occasion, and so too have thoughts about the unity and harmony of the world, and also thoughts about love.

### **Spiritual practices**

There are also certain spiritual practices that seem to encourage the experiences. These include forms of Zen meditation and certain yogic practices. In these cases, the ensuing extrovertive experiences are not unexpected in the traditions concerned. But there are also some religious practices and rituals that aren't intended to have this outcome. For instance, I've come across a couple of instances in which Christian confirmation ceremonies have led to unitive expansions.

### **Literature, music, art**

Literature, music, and art can trigger extrovertive experiences. For instance, Wordsworth's poetry has been known to have this effect. Also the Hindu scripture the *Bhagavad Gita* has been implicated in more than one case. Music, even just one note, has triggered the experiences. Dance and singing too.

### **Psychological distress**

The second most common facilitative circumstance in my study, after exposure to the beauty and calming influence of nature, was psychological distress. Many extrovertive experiences occur during times of suffering, whether the grief of bereavement, worry, depression, or existential angst, and sometimes at moments of crisis and when a prayer for help is uttered. It can seem that the experience intervenes to bring some relief or to show a way out of the difficulty, perhaps by putting the troubling matter in perspective or giving some insight into the meaning of suffering.

### **Other circumstances**

I've come across a few accounts of extrovertive unity in **childbirth**. There are also quite a few **near-death experiences** that brought unity, knowledge, and visions of the cosmos. And there are several accounts of people who have had the experiences during **sleep**, either in dreams or whilst falling asleep or waking up. Perhaps the most controversial circumstances are **sex**, **drugs**, and **mental and physical illnesses**. Some scholars worry that if they admit that mystical experiences take place under these circumstances, mysticism will be explained away by sceptics and naturalistic thinkers as mere sexual elation or brain disturbance. My own view is that genuine extrovertive mystical experiences do take place under these circumstances, as the evidence clearly indicates, but this does not mean that the experiences can be reduced to sex and brain disturbance. It is incorrect to assume that experiences are reducible to their circumstances. For instance, if it were found that someone's mystical experiences were associated with epilepsy or a brain tumour, it wouldn't necessarily follow that the brain dysfunction *created* the experiences. It might merely mean that changes to the brain allowed the experiences to take place by interfering with something that normally inhibits them. To use an analogy, when a pipe breaks and water shoots out, we don't suppose that the breakage *created* the water. Rather we suppose that the water was already there and

had only to be released. Now, just as water can be released in a controlled fashion by opening a tap or in a disorderly fashion by breaking the pipe, we can suppose that mystical experiences can be released in well-regulated or chaotic ways. Experiences released by psychedelics and organic disorders can be chaotic but may still be genuine.

## CONSEQUENCES

Moving on from circumstances to consequences, we can ask what impact the experiences have. What are their after-effects? At the very least, people who have the experiences find them memorable – given their striking characteristics, the experiences are not easily forgotten, and for some people, the experiences constitute the most important events in their lives. True, in some cases, the impact seems to be negligible, but in many cases - particularly with the more powerful experiences - there are significant consequences.

After-effects can include heightened perceptions and feelings of unity, love, happiness, and peace that last beyond the central experience for minutes, hours, and even weeks. There can be gratitude for the experience, and surprise and puzzlement are common reactions.

Although extrovertive experience is generally positive, it can, like other unusual or intense experiences, bring difficulties. The sheer peculiarity of the event can make some question their own sanity, and the experience can have an unbalancing effect, leading to difficult emotions, misinterpretations and self-inflation, the so-called ‘pathology of the sublime’.

The more intense and prolonged experiences can be particularly difficult, for the return to ordinary consciousness can be a great shock. After the blissful state of unity, knowledge and love, the return to everyday limitations can feel like a prison sentence or a fall from heaven. As one man put it, “I can only describe it as the feeling of an angel banished from the Courts of light” (RERC 189). There can be a profound sense of loss, feelings of depression, and a desperate longing for the condition to return. One can feel isolated from others, who more likely than not will fail to understand if they are told about the experience. It may be feared, with good reason, that others will think one mad, or it may be thought that the experience is too private and precious to risk exposure to others. And to talk about it might be to devalue and disempower it. Sometimes the experiences stimulate interest in philosophy, religion, and mysticism, and some atheists and agnostics have reappraised their positions in the light of their experiences.

The experiences can leave subjects with the conviction that the depths of reality were contacted, and with beliefs in the fundamental all-rightness of the world and the importance of love, and they can act as a spur towards humanitarian concern and action. In these and other respects, the impact of extrovertive mystical experiences, particularly the more powerful ones, is similar to the impact of near-death experiences.

## EXPLANATIONS

But are persons who have the experiences justified in the belief that they came into contact with reality? What really lies behind the experiences? Is it necessary to invoke spiritual and transpersonal realities to explain the experiences or can they be accounted for in a purely naturalistic framework? With these sorts of questions, we come to my final area of enquiry: how are extrovertive mystical experiences to be explained?

Quite a few explanations have been put forward over the last hundred years or so. I’ll attempt to give you a flavour of these, without going into detail. Explanations can be classified according to whether they hold that extrovertive mystical experiences (and mystical experiences in general) are:

- essentially spiritual and **transpersonal**, that is reaching beyond the person to some deeper reality;
- essentially **intrapersonal**, that is, a product of inborn biological and psychological processes;
- essentially **constructed**, the product of a learning process, that is, a product of indoctrination and enculturation.

The opposite view to this constructivist approach is the **deconstructivist** view that mystical experience involves an unlearning or deconditioning. Deconstructivist explanations can belong to the transpersonal or intrapersonal categories, for deconstruction can be understood to reveal transpersonal realities or purely psychological/biological processes.

**1. Transpersonal**  
*contact with deeper realities takes place*

**2. Intrapersonal**  
*product of innate biology & psychology*

**3. Constructivist (v. Deconstructivist)**  
*'learning process': religious conditioning*

### Transpersonal Explanation

Some of these theorists were secular or 'unchurched', that is, they theorized outside any particular religious tradition, whilst others have worked within religious traditions. In the former group, we have R. M. Bucke, and Edward Carpenter, who at the end of the nineteenth century described and attempted to explain something that they called 'cosmic consciousness'.

R. M. Bucke

(1837 – 1902)



*Cosmic Consciousness (1901)*

Evolutionary emergence of a new human faculty: 'cosmic consciousness'

1. simple consciousness
2. self consciousness
3. cosmic consciousness

**Richard Maurice Bucke**, a Canadian psychiatrist born in England in 1837, is best known today for his book *Cosmic Consciousness*, first published in 1901 but still in print. He had an extrovertive experience in 1872 and later came to understand it in terms of an evolutionary theory of consciousness.

According to Bucke, consciousness evolves through three stages. First, there's the Simple Consciousness possessed by higher animals, which consists of a combination of sense-impressions or 'percepts' with some pre-linguistic abstractions called 'recepts'. Then comes the Self Consciousness that emerges with human beings, which combines the percepts and receipts with fully abstract 'concepts' expressed in language, including the concept of self. Finally, a new order of consciousness is just beginning to emerge, evident in mystics, called Cosmic Consciousness, which introduces higher moral elements and intuition into the mix. Note that cosmic consciousness is an emergent *human* faculty, a result of evolution through natural selection and cultural influence. It is a mental faculty capable of revealing the life and order of the universe. Bucke's theory is *psychological*, although it's a *transpersonal* kind of psychology because he supposes that the universe is inherently alive, spiritual and immaterial, although without explaining in what way this is the case.

In the same period, **Edward Carpenter** also put forward a three-stage evolutionary theory of consciousness.

## Edward Carpenter

(1844 – 1929)

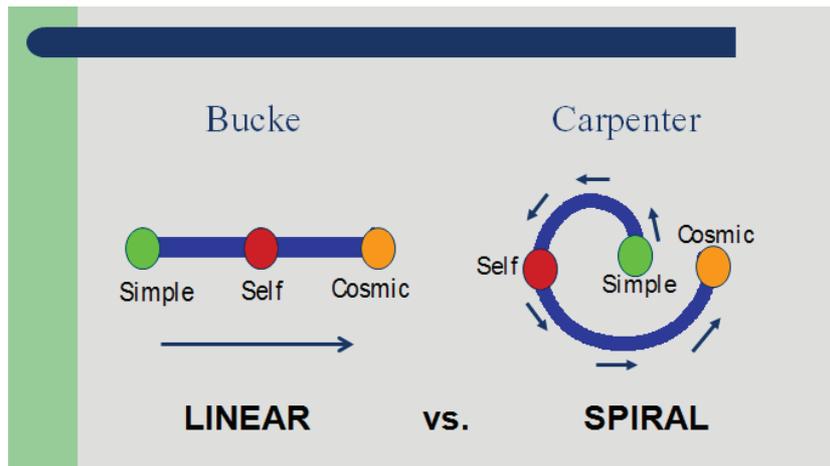


*The Art of Creation (1904)*

**Cosmic Consciousness is possible because the cosmos exists as the contents of a universal mind or self**

Carpenter is a very interesting thinker and activist who pursued many issues, including socialism, humanitarianism, environmentalism, women's rights, sexual reform, and the homosexual cause. Several years before Jung, he even came up with a theory that is very similar to the Jungian theory of the archetypes and the collective unconscious. With regard to cosmic consciousness, Carpenter supposed that the evolutionary development of human consciousness is possible because the universe is itself mental in nature. He is an idealist thinker who takes mind rather than matter to be the primary reality.

Bucke and Carpenter had been in touch with each other on the subject of cosmic consciousness, but they understood it in rather different ways.



Bucke's evolutionary scheme is linear, with unity appearing only with the emergence of cosmic consciousness. By contrast, Carpenter's scheme is spiral, with unity already implicit in the simple consciousness of animals, indigenous peoples, and young children, who Carpenter thinks share in some rudimentary way with the great universal consciousness. This primal unity is lost with the coming of self-consciousness and civilization, but a higher unity is finally achieved in cosmic consciousness after the painful journey through self-consciousness. So, in Carpenter's spiral scheme, cosmic consciousness is related to simple consciousness in that they both partake of the universal mind and its unity. But in Bucke's linear scheme, simple consciousness has no unitive character, and it is poles apart from cosmic consciousness.

Round about the time that Bucke and Carpenter were theorizing, liberal Christian thinkers were also taking an interest in extrovertive mystical experience. I won't go into the details except to mention two names, **W. R. Inge**, Dean of St Paul's, and **Evelyn Underhill**. Like Bucke and Carpenter, they believed that extrovertive mystical experience has a spiritual basis. For these Christian thinkers, the extrovertive mystic discovers the presence of God in nature, the immanent aspect of God in the creation.

**William Ralph Inge**  
*Christian Mysticism (1899)*

**Evelyn Underhill**  
*Mysticism (1911)*

**'the presence of God in nature'**

In the mid-twentieth century, two notable theorists took transpersonal approaches. Like Bucke and Carpenter, these were secular thinkers. **Aldous Huxley**, inspired by his mescaline experiences, suggested that biological and psychological filters open up during mystical experiences. These filters normally exclude large portions of reality, but when they open up, we begin to apprehend the world in finer detail and with greater clarity. In fact, Evelyn Underhill had a similar idea, and the general idea of filtered consciousness dates back to William James, Henri Bergson and other thinkers at the close of the nineteenth century.

## Aldous Huxley

*The Doors of Perception (1954)*

**‘filter theory’: brain and mind  
valves open to let in  
transpersonal contents**

Another notable mid-twentieth century theorist who took a transpersonal line was a British-born analytic philosopher who taught at Princeton, **Walter Terence Stace**. In fact, it was he who introduced the term ‘extrovertive mystical experience’. Stace supposed that the mystical content of all genuine mystical experience, including extrovertive experience, is a *pure consciousness* that is common to everyone, a consciousness that is completely empty of contents.

## W. T. Stace

*Mysticism and Philosophy (1960)*

**the essence  
of all mystical experience is  
‘pure consciousness’**

According to Stace, the nature content of the experience isn’t mystical at all, which is a surprising position to take. Actually, Stace complicates the matter, but it isn’t necessary to go into the details here (for a thorough critique, see my study *Mystical Encounters with the Natural World*).

### **Intrapersonal Explanation**

Let’s have a very quick look at some theorists who suppose that it’s enough to raise ordinary human biology and psychology to explain extrovertive mystical experience. **Sigmund Freud** himself was one of these theorists. He explained ‘the oceanic feeling’, a feeling of ‘being one with the external world as a whole’, as a remnant of early infantile thinking. When adults have feelings of unity with the world, they have regressed to an early ego-state in which the infant has not yet separated itself off from the rest of the world and therefore thinks that it includes everything. This isn’t a convincing theory, as it doesn’t address some important characteristics, such as the deep *noetic quality* of the experience.

## Sigmund Freud

*Civilization and Its Discontents (1930)*

**'oceanic feeling' is a leftover from early infantile thinking, when the ego included everything**

Another theorist who attempted to reduce extrovertive experience to human psychology or psychopathology was **Robert Charles Zaehner**, a professor of comparative religion at Oxford. For several reasons, including an intense dislike of Aldous Huxley's mescaline mysticism, Zaehner took a very negative attitude towards extrovertive experience, and he attempted to explain it away in several different ways. For instance, he often claimed that the experience is just mania, a mental state of great excitement and delusion, whether caused by manic-depressive illness, drugs or extreme spiritual practices.

## R. C. Zaehner

*Mysticism Sacred and Profane (1957)*

**Extrovertive experience is just a manic state of mind, or it is unity with an inner mental model of the world.**

But Zaehner also had a more interesting explanation. Zaehner said that although nature mystics believe that they have become united with the world itself, this is impossible and really they have become unified with an inner, psychological model of the world. They have become unified with the contents of their own personal minds.

Finally, among the intrapersonal theories, there are several contemporary explanations that take a neurobiological or neuropsychological approach. These explanations often leave the impression that it is enough to look at the functioning or malfunctioning of the brain, or parts of the brain, such as the temporal lobe, to explain mystical experience. One of the better-known explanations of this type comes from **Eugene d'Aquili** and **Andrew Newberg**. They suppose that in mystical and meditative states a certain part of the brain – called the Orientation Association Area (OAA) located in the posterior superior parietal lobe (PSPL) – becomes *starved of sensory stimuli* but nevertheless continues working. This area, they say, supports our sense of spatial orientation. But starved of sensory input, the area no longer detects any self-boundaries, and as a result the self is interpreted as endless and intimately

connected with everything. Although this explanation may have some relevance for meditative and mystical states in which sensory stimuli have been shut out, it's not very appropriate for many extrovertive experiences, which often begin without any prior shut-down in sensory input.

**Neuropsychology**  
e.g., Eugene d'Aquili and Andrew Newberg  
*The Mystical Mind* (1999)  
**Self-boundaries are no longer detected by OAA (in parietal lobe) when sensory input drops off**

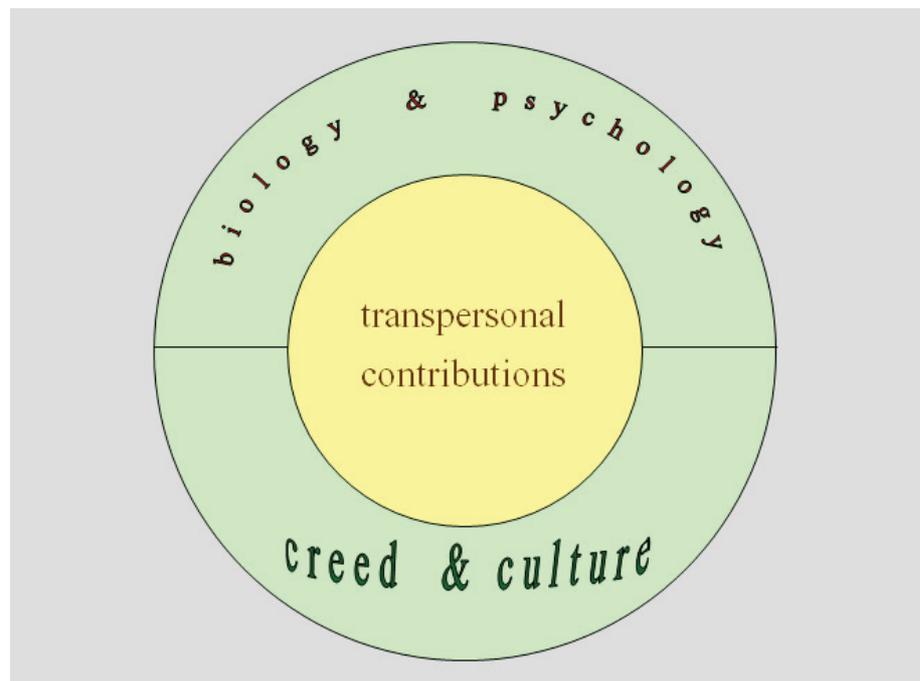
### **Constructivist Explanation**

I'm going to finish with one last type of explanation that's been popular over the last twenty-five years. According to *constructivist* or *radical contextualist* thinkers, mystical experiences are products of religious conditioning. They claim that all experience is heavily conditioned by what we've learnt, and mystical experience is no exception. Mystics learn to have their experiences by being immersed in the doctrines and practices of their religious traditions: Christian mystics learn to have Christian mystical experiences, Buddhist mystics learn to have Buddhist mystical experiences, and the two sorts of experiences are very different. This kind of explanation is very much in keeping with influential currents of thought in the social sciences since the 1960s, which emphasize psychological and social constructivism, and cultural relativism.

**Radical contextualism**  
e.g., Steven Katz  
*Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (1979)  
**All experience is constructed, including mystical experience**

However, contextualist explanation does not work very well for extrovertive mystical experience. For one thing, extrovertive experience often comes out of the blue, with no prior exposure to mystical ideas or training. Additionally, extrovertive experiences do seem to have some cross-cultural similarity, such as the special light that is sometimes experienced to pervade the environment.

In fact, those thinkers who say that mystical experience results from a **deconstruction** or **deconditioning** of ordinary experience, rather than a construction or conditioning, are probably closer to the truth. Many of the circumstances of extrovertive experience suggest an abatement, unlearning, forgetting, or interruption of the usual concepts that structure experience. Anything that can lessen or disrupt these structuring concepts, especially the sharp self–other distinction (such as absorption in beauty, relaxation, concern, love, drugs, illness) seems capable of encouraging the experiences. I therefore have a great deal of sympathy for the view that extrovertive experiences depend on a temporary deconditioning of experience. But in itself this is not enough to explain the full range of experiential characteristics. It may explain why one feels unity with the world, but why should a reduction in sharp self–other discriminations lead, for instance, to a transfiguring luminosity, a sense of vastly expanded knowledge, sense of profound reality, cosmic vision, and so forth?



After this brief and very incomplete survey, you may be wondering which kind of explanatory approach I favour. I think extrovertive experience (and mystical experience in general) is transpersonal in *essence*, although involves other factors too. For one thing, purely intrapersonal, constructivist, and deconstructivist explanations have great difficulty accounting for the range and profound quality of the experiential characteristics. I don't mean to say that human biology/psychology and religious/cultural conditioning or deconditioning don't have important roles to play. A comprehensive theory will undoubtedly combine transpersonal, intrapersonal, constructivist, and deconstructivist elements. But I strongly suspect that something transpersonal lies at the core of the experiences.