

A DRUG-INDUCED ECSTATIC EXPERIENCE

PAUL BERGMAN, PH.D.¹

Laboratory of Psychology

National Institute of Mental Health, Bethesda, Maryland

The subject of this observation is Mr. D., a man of university education, aged fifty, married, and father of several children. Though his own profession lies in a different field, he has taken an interest in psychoanalytic psychology ever since a therapeutic analysis, years ago, relieved him of a mild depression. He gave me the following account of his experience.

A psychiatrist had offered him some ampoules of LSD, assuming that Mr. D. would be interested in trying the drug. Mr. D. was interested, but apprehensive. He had read that the drug sometimes produces temporary psychotic symptomatology. He thought it might make him feel paranoid for a few hours. Yet he agreed after some hesitation and took the drug. Subsequently he reported to this writer on his experience and discussed it with him in considerable detail. The reader will find a report made and transmitted in good faith, but with inevitable secondary elaborations. He will also have to bear with Mr. D.'s tendency to weave his psychoanalytic theorizing into the texture of the experience.

Mr. D. took LSD twice, both times in his home. The first time he cautiously took somewhat less than 50% of the standard dosage, which is 0.1 micrograms dissolved in water. The second time he took the 0.1 micrograms.

Nothing of particular interest, Mr. D. thought, happened the first time. He felt tired and sleepy, not much different than if he had taken a sleeping medicine. He felt warm, with the warmth mainly concentrated in the area of his chest. There was also a paresthesia-like change which seemed to be the only strange feature of this experience. Mr. D. felt as if his chest protruded in a marked manner like, he imagined, a lieutenant's of the Marines marching in a parade. The experience made no sense

to him. But since he felt entirely back to normal after about four hours he did not fear to continue with the full dosage at the appointed time, a week later.

In the morning of that day Mr. D. read a neurological paper related to one of his professional interests. One sentence of this article was destined to function as important "day-residue" in the drug-induced experience of the latter part of the day. The sentence, as Mr. D. remembers it, may have read something like this: "In epileptic attacks when all the neurons fire synchronously, we get an impression of the power the nervous system is capable of discharging." Mr. D. did not think that this sentence or any other in the article arrested his mind for long at the time that he read it.

In the middle of the afternoon Mr. D. took the drug, then settled down to read a professional journal. After two pages of it, however, he felt that a certain nebulousness of mind made it difficult for him to understand what he read. He then took to an illustrated magazine and browsed through it for a few minutes. Soon he gave up this activity. He retired to his room and stretched out on the bed. He again felt somewhat tired and sleepily, also warm, and the paresthesia of the expanded chest. He felt slightly drowsy. He closed his eyes to concentrate better on what seemed to be coming on from the inside. Apprehensiveness gradually set in but did not grow to a very threatening level. Mr. D. remembered that about one half hour after the beginning of the experiment he opened his eyes to look at the clock. He told himself that whatever might be coming would be over before five to six hours and therefore could not be so dreadful. But he felt unsure now that he would continue to be able to take care of himself during these hours. In a way charac-

teristic of him he worried lest with the approach of evening he might get to feel cool and not be able to cover himself. So in spite of feeling quite warm he buried himself under blankets.

Mr. D. did not remember much about the content of the next half hour. He felt for a while as if there were creases in his chest. Then as if the creases would open up and an inner world was pouring out from there. Gradually he came to feel that something "big" was happening, that this inner world was becoming tremendous.

About one hour after the beginning of the experiment some massively impressive visions came which Mr. D. believed he recognized while they were happening, as visualizations of the change in state he was undergoing. He thought there had been several such visions but he remembered only two. The first of these included apparently also an acoustic element: A host of medieval knights in armor on galloping horses seemingly storming towards the dreamer (as a movie camera might capture such a scene) and at the same time as if coming from the back of the dreamer's head and galloping toward his forehead. Dread, power and beauty were united in this picture. But the next picture surpassed it by far in power and beauty, while little dread was left in it. Mr. D. thought that he received this picture with the immediate conviction that it was the most beautiful and mighty thing he had ever seen. It was a deep, scooped-out valley at the bottom of a gigantic wall of mountains, the Himalayas. A mass of thick black thunderclouds was rapidly rolling over the crest of the mountains. Again Mr. D. simultaneously had the feeling that the mass of clouds poured forward from the occiput.

From that moment on fear was entirely gone. Mr. D. realized with a surprised chuckle that he had entered an ecstatic state, not any kind of anxiety-ridden psychotic state that he had expected, and had hoped to withstand bravely if he could. Amazed, amused, delighted, repeatedly chuckling, he watched from then on for the next hour and a half a continuous torrent of visions. They changed with fantastic rapidity. All seemed beautiful and interesting, some humorous and amusing, some idyllic and peacefully satisfying, some

powerful and pathetic. At no time did Mr. D.'s observing self lose its continuity. More than that, he accompanied the pictures and his ecstatic delight with the concerns and thoughts typical for his usual sober personality. He even became concerned lest he diminish the intensity of the glorious experience by the workaday thoughts with which he followed it or tried to interpret it. He consoled himself with the idea that in exchange for the somewhat tarnished brilliance of the experience he might gain some residue of insight useful after the experience would have ended. There was another more immediate compensation: As long as the high phase of the experience lasted every abstract thought became immediately transformed into an original and witty visualization.

Mr. D. believes that reflective thought sporadically punctuated the whole of his experience. Even before he became clearly aware of the main topic of the stream of his visual fantasies—I have not yet mentioned this topic but shall soon do so—he began excitedly to reflect on ecstasy. This is what people meant who spoke of paradise, he thought. This is what everybody in his way tries to achieve whether he knows it or not. One will have to tell people that this is the means to the end they seek. But then they will put their tools down and turn to the drug! Why should a painter want to paint, a writer to write, an explorer to explore, a scientist to do research, a worker to produce, a farmer to cultivate? Why a long and weary detour leading to partial or total failure, since there is a shortcut leading to certain success? And what will happen to interpersonal relations? Everybody will sit in his cubbyhole and drink his drug, forgetful of the rest of mankind. This seemed a terrible prospect. But would it not be unethical to keep the discovery of happiness a secret? Should mankind toil while Mr. D. and some happy few would enjoy this blissful addiction?

Why was the state so extremely blissful? Mr. D. answered this question in terms of the sentence he had read in the morning. He told himself that now "all his neurons were firing."¹ Perfect activity of the nervous system

¹ Discussing this day-rest Mr. D. recalled Dostoevski's description of ecstasy at the onset of epileptic at-

is what we all aspire to, and he had achieved it for the first time in his life. But was it really the first time? He had also an ever deepening conviction as if in deep infancy days he must already have known such a state.

Mr. D. could not recall how the main topic of his fantasies became patent to him. He said that probably all at once it came upon him like an intuition that the female breast was the center of everything. Equally immediately he realized that he was identical with everything he perceived in his deluge of visions. The breast was everywhere in innumerable transparent disguises. He remembered the extreme sweetness of a vision of the sea with waves rising to form beautiful breasts and rocking creatures on the rise and fall; and the similar sweetness of a vision of a mountain range with the tops of the highest mountains shaped like breasts, softly piercing through high clouds. So the breast was the meaning of everything, the breast was his own meaning, his own warmly rising breast.

He had immediate, direct participation with everything he saw in his visions, whether it was a live object or not. He was the fish he saw swimming amongst the deep sea coral reefs. He was also the sea anemone which inclined its many petals in the soft current made by the passing fish. He was the match in the match box which he visualized, or was he all the matches in the box? Confounding problem for a moment's length! Fortunately Mr. D. decided this was a pseudo-problem and, typically for the state he was in, immediately saw an amusing caricature-like figure representing and acting the role of a pseudo-problem.

Mr. D. believed that he must have seen hundreds of different scenes changing with fantastic speed during the height of his ecstasy. Most of the pictures were not naturalistic, but rather stylized, like works of art. The style of these pictures changed frequently as if they had been made by artists of different periods and temperament. Mr. D. said he saw classic romantic, caricaturistic, and cubis-

tic styles. At one point he felt himself particularly amused by the figure of a police officer going around with a triangular head. This was supposed to make fun of the guardian of law and order. The change of styles was entertaining him, but Mr. D. remembered also a thought which instilled a drop of bitterness in his supreme bliss: That, if he were a creative artist rather than the person of mediocre acquaintance with the arts he really was, he might now see every scene in his own personal style.

Of the many pictures which Mr. D. believed he had seen, he remembered only a very few. In contrast he believed that he had not forgotten any of the few thoughts he thought during that time. Actually only one thought emerged directly from the ecstatic experience as its direct fruit, possibly at the time he visualized the ocean: That nature, or life, like a never-drying breast, gives her love to all living things. It does not matter if some suffer, some fail, some die early. The stream of life and love continues in its superabundant wealth and joyousness.

There were other thoughts, but these were thoughts about and around the experience, not thoughts coming out from the experience itself. Mr. D., after adopting for his the formulation of "all neurons firing," asked himself at one point what might be the relationship of sexual pleasure to the delight he was experiencing. First he compared sex to a "partial drive" which assumedly would fire only a part of the neurons. Then the idea occurred to him that sex might fire all the neurons in some ideally healthy personality. In that case his blissful state might come from satisfaction as part of the oral drive, assumedly since infancy dissociated from the rest of his personality. Then the alternative thought struck him that he might no longer be at an age where one could quite conjure up the full brilliance and power of sex. Mr. D. tried to think, to feel sex, but made no headway, immersed in the sea of blissful feeling as he was. His mind turned to some of the people in his life, friends and colleagues. He observed an almost unlimited yet gradated amount of liking for all the people of whom he thought. Smilingly he anticipated that he would be able to tell them in all honesty that he found

tacks. Here is then the associative bridge which facilitated the use of the neurological picture for the characterization of the ecstatic experience.

nothing but good feelings for them when he probed his depths. He experimented with thinking of a colleague of his with whom he had had a recent unpleasant scene. He found that he was capable of just the slightest trace of annoyance. But it seemed silly to let such a negative feeling linger on. He planned to be less petty and straighten things out with the colleague.

The blissful state seemed to Mr. D. to be a powerful solvent for any unhappy and painful thought. With therapeutic intention he called up the worst thought he could think of. It was the thought of his frustrated desire to do creative work, to "immortalize" himself. Again he could feel some trace of pang as his mind dwelt on it. But the desire for creation seemed immediately understandable as previously unrecognized desire to function as feeding breast to mankind, and it seemed to have lost some of its poignancy by this understanding. But while the ecstasy had power to dissolve mental pain it failed with physical pain. Mr. D., on that day, suffered from a slight, trivial pain in a shoulder. This pain delineated itself clearly throughout the entire experience on his awareness. But events which otherwise would command his interest seemed very remote and unimportant. Mr. D., lying with closed eyes, heard rain fall outside. He remembered that he had left something in the back yard which would be spoiled. But he smilingly rejected the idea of going out in order to save a few foolish dollars.

It was about two hours after the beginning of the experiment when a challenge of action arose for Mr. D. He became aware of a fullness in his bladder and thought that before long he would have to do something about it. He had no desire to wet the bed. But he felt quite resistant to interrupting the ongoing stream of marvels and against making the effort to reach the bathroom. He was not even sure that he could get himself there. Finally the consideration of what impression a wet bed would make on his family when they learned of it prevailed. He opened his eyes and pulled himself up and out of his dream world. He observed to his great surprise that he had been lying flat on his back. As long as he remembered he had always rested and slept sideways.

Walking to the bathroom he observed some uncertainty of gait. The stream of pictures was suspended. As soon as he had accomplished his purpose he had the unusual and highly amusing visual impression of seeing the toilet bowl receding in the distance below him, as though seen through the wrong end of a telescope.

Mr. D. went back to his bed and closed his eyes. The visions continued immediately. Mr. D. believed that around this time he wondered in his mind why all the appearances used the visual modality. He had always conceived of himself as an acoustic type, e.g., thought that he derived much more enjoyment from music than from the visual arts. As soon as he raised this question he received an answer, again mainly in the visual modality. A sphinx seemed to speak and point out that music belonged in the "anal world." Simultaneously rose a picture of a rounded hollow space as large as a big brass instrument. Mr. D., knew that this picture represented his anal zone. He felt for about a minute an extreme sensitivity in that part of his body. It seemed very reasonable and understandable to him that acoustic stimulation would reach him at this organ. Implied in this thinking was that visual and oral stimulation for him belonged together. With the temporary liberation of usually repressed orality went also a flowering of some undeveloped visual potentialities. Mr. D. was not sure whether it was during the experience itself or afterwards that he formulated this conclusion.

It was two and a half hours after the beginning of the experiment when Mr. D. observed that the speed of production of pictures slowed down. He judged that the effect of the drug was beginning to taper off. Immediately new types of pictures visualized this phase of the experience: Enormous masses of a dough-like matter slowly falling. Female breasts, old, part empty, hanging, withered. Old ladies with knitting needles.

Mr. D. felt now a somewhat diminished "firing of neurons" which he visualized as discharge of sparks from the brain matter. He became aware that all the bony structure of his head, from the occiput to the chin, felt compressed in rigid immobility. He was acquainted with Freud's thought about the

physical immobility of the sleeper being the condition for the relative freedom of the dream imagination. He thought—in analogy to this formulation—that the rigidity of his skull freed the brain for its unusual activity. Around this time Mr. D. saw beautiful patterns of Oriental rugs which he, to his surprise, called Bosnic rugs. He also finally had his wish fulfilled to have acoustic inspirations. For a short while he heard soft and yet powerful orchestral or organ music.

About three and a half hours after the beginning Mr. D. went once more to the bathroom. After this, feeling very warm, he pushed most of the covers away. He observed that he now rested again on the side as was his wont. He began to open his eyes more frequently. At each opening for a while he had the illusion of some fire flickering up in his brain and throwing a shimmer of light into the room which was all dark by then.

After about four and a half hours of the total experiment he decided to get up. He interpreted some sounds of voices in the adjoining room as expressions of worry about him. He wanted to reassure his family by joining them. Both the mirror and comments from his family convinced Mr. D. that he looked unusually flushed, bright-eyed and satisfied. He now felt somewhat groggy. His jaws seemed heavy, his tongue hard to move. It resembled the feeling after novocaine injections at the dentist's. The brain felt "like a lazy, pleasantly warm wad of dough." If Mr. D. had been able to draw himself at this time,

he commented, he would have represented himself with wide open eyes and mouth, the arms and hands stretched forward in motionless marvel.

He was several hours beyond suppertime at this point. As he had not eaten since lunch, he was invited to eat. He told his wife he would be glad to eat in a short while. In the meantime he sat, not saying much, still lapping up the residues of delight which seemed to somehow concentrate around his mouth like the left-over taste of some delicious food one has just finished.

About five hours after the beginning of the experiment supper was served to Mr. D. To his surprise he found that he could not even taste of the food. He wanted to eat, the food looked good, but he felt and acted as if under hypnotic suggestion not to eat. He put his fork in the food, then slowed down increasingly as he got it closer to his mouth, finally came to a complete stop when touching the lips. He thought he would choke to death if anybody at that point would force him to swallow. Two hours later he tried again, with precisely the same result. He took a gulp of water eight hours after the beginning of the experiment, and then went to bed. Sleep was normal. A slight headache early the next morning came as aftermath.

To conclude this report I might mention that Mr. D. has at no time since felt any wish to take the drug again, very much in contrast to his expectations during the experience.