

Toward a Critique of Psychedelic Reason

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For every human illness, somewhere in the World exists the plant which is the cure. I believe that there is healing potential locked inside plants which is integral with their evolution, just as part of human evolution is to learn to tap this wonderful gift of Nature.¹

¹ Ascribed to Rudolf Steiner. Despite extensive searches in the Steiner Archive (Steiner, 2023), I have been unable to track down this quotation. It may be that it has only been orally transmitted, since Steiner taught and lectured frequently. However, many similar quotes that deal with more-or-less the same subject matter can be found scattered through Steiner's oeuvre. Here, one can find multiple places in which Steiner freely draws connections between cosmic cycles, evolutionary processes, the (human) body, various forms of medicine, the mineral, plant and animal kingdoms and the idea that Nature always provides a cure because the entire cosmos is interconnected. Clearly, Steiner was interested in the healing properties of plants, advocating for organic farming and teaching botany to children even before this became a cultural trend; but most importantly, he attempted to integrate and systematize his insights, and thereby formulate a comprehensive (organicist) worldview. Here is a representative selection, cited using Steiner archive numbers (GA): "This is the place to use the remedies you find in the plants and minerals. For everything belonging to the plants and minerals has a profound importance for everything to do with the human etheric body. So when we know an illness has arisen in the etheric body, and it appears in a certain way in the glandular system, we must find the remedy that can correctly repair the complex of interconnections" (Steiner, 2023: GA 107, *The Being of Man and His Future Evolution. Different Types of Illness*, lecture delivered in Berlin, November 1910); "This rhythmical order is there in the whole of nature. In the plants one leaf follows another in rhythmical growth; the petals of the blossoms are ordered rhythmically, everything is rhythmically ordered. Fever takes a rhythmical course in sickness; the whole of life is rhythmical" (Steiner, 2023: GA 184, *Three Streams of Human Evolution*, lecture delivered in Dornach, October 1918); "Study, for instance, a plant which is in this respect an instructor in the realm of nature; *Cichorium intybus*, the chicory. From this plant we may learn a variety of facts about our human bodies, if we only take the trouble to do so" (Steiner, 2023: GA 312, *Spiritual Science and Medicine*, lecture X, delivered in Dornach, March 1920); "We must also see that with any process taking place in the human being in an ascending curve, let us say, we must seek outside the human being in nature for the descending curve. In this way we will be able to modify curves that are ascending too abruptly, and so forth. Medicine demands knowledge of the whole world in a certain sense. I have been able to offer only a tiny fragment, of

To make biological survival possible, Mind at Large has to be funneled through the reducing valve of the brain and nervous system. What comes out at the other end is a measly trickle of the kind of consciousness which will help us to stay alive on the surface of this particular planet. To formulate and express the contents of this reduced awareness, man has invented and endlessly elaborated those symbol-systems and implicit philosophies which we call languages. [Every individual is its victim] in so far as it confirms him in the belief that reduced awareness is the only awareness and as it bedevils his sense of reality, so that he is all too apt to take his concepts for data, his words for actual things. (Huxley 2004: p. 11)

Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language. (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009: p. 52e, §109)

The philosopher's treatment of a question is like the treatment of an illness. (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009: p. 98e, §255)

1. Introduction

In pursuit of real philosophy (and following in the illustrious footsteps of Aldous Huxley), I started experimenting with taking magic mushrooms. Hallucinogenic mushrooms have been around for millennia, and there is a veritable history to be written about their symbiotic relationship with humanity. So-called “magic mushrooms” are specimens of the genus *Psilocybe*, which is distributed around the Old and the New World.

The genus *Psilocybe* produces potent species that cause hallucinogenic effects, and, if you believe the enthusiasts, they provide great existential and spiritual insights. Not all species are equally potent, depending on the concentration of psychoactive compounds they contain.

The active compounds psilocin and psilocybin affect the visual cortex, heighten peripheral vision and produce visual, tactile as well as auditive hallucinations. Some species create an introspective mood (*P. tampanensis* got its nickname “philosopher’s stone” from somewhere, I suppose), while other species stimulate creative abilities. Depending on one’s physical constitution, the amount of psilocybin, and the dosage, the effects range from mild to simply spectacular.

course, but this fragment should make clear to you that there must be an entirely different understanding of the nature of *Urtica dioica*, *Colchicum autumnale*, or indeed of any other plant, the plants themselves must tell us where their descending tendency is leading” (Steiner, 2023: GA 314, *Fundamentals of Anthroposophic Medicine*, lecture IV, delivered in Stuttgart, October 1922).

Huxley ingested a slightly different psychoactive compound for his experiment, and opted for mescaline, a far more potent drug compared to magic mushrooms. But some of the effects he describes are roughly similar. So, as a guide, *The Doors of Perception* makes for excellent preparatory reading.

The quotation at the beginning of this essay pre-empts something that I would like to argue here. It seems to me that we use the full capacity of our (fully embodied) brains and nervous systems only partially. The mind seems to me a far greater and deeper place than everyday experience would have us believe. Does that mean that we all should sit around, taking psychoactive compounds, as a 21st century equivalent of the hippie community? Not necessarily. Even while the hippie community has been painted in ghastly colors by those who had an active interest in keeping the debilitating and mechanistic 9-to-5 economic system running, there are certainly drawbacks in opting-out of societal life altogether in order to explore psychic space. However, we would have achieved something here if psychoactive compounds were not by default regarded as dangerous, as unnecessary, as something keeping people from doing their (9-to-5) jobs and as a bad habit of depraved minds more generally.

2. Magic Mushrooms and Drug Use in Modern Society

The first thing to be noticed is that when it comes to drugs, the severe problems always start with the concentration of the psychoactive compound.² The refinement of distilling techniques led to the gradual invention of hard liquor, a class of drinks that is overrepresented in the group of alcohol addicts. But if you let wheat or vines ferment on their own, the alcohol production process terminates naturally at 11-14%. At that point, the alcohol level in the fluid kills the yeasts responsible for the fermentation, terminating the process. This is not to say that wine or beer can't cause problems. Instead, it means that to sustain a very serious alcoholic habit on beer alone takes a lot of effort: for one thing, you have to accustom your stomach to hold enormous amounts of fluid, especially so when it takes more and more alcohol to reach the desired state of intoxication.

Strong liquors provided a shortcut for this problem: four times the amount of alcohol in a quarter of the volume. And with such concentrations, problems develop very rapidly. We can make the same case with regard to modern hard drugs. To produce opium, a rather long and painstaking manual process is required, so the end product becomes expensive, and only contains a certain concentration of active compounds. Enter modern heroine (combined with the portable hypodermic syringe) and we end up in a very different situation, in which addicts possess a highly concentrated drug combined with a relatively easy means to administer it.

² A concise and well-informed history of psychoactive compounds has been compiled in (McKenna, 2021).

Both types of drugs are used recreationally in the modern context. Especially alcohol is very widespread and acquired social acceptance, even to the point that the better liquors are associated with a well-developed culinary taste.

Likewise, a variety of “party drugs,” all the way from coke to MDMA and XTC can be found in the more adventurous walks of night life. In all these cases, drugs are used because they make one feel good, relaxed, carefree, or because the party has to go on, and to dance for eight hours in a row is rather taxing without any narcotic support.

In a society where a variety of drugs is available—if not always without some effort—it is no wonder that the recreational aspect of drug use takes center stage. To be sure, this started already in the 19th century, where the upper class and bohemian artists alike experimented with a wide variety of drugs, ranging from absinthe to opium. Correspondingly, the images of the “opium fiend” or deranged, absinthe-infused artist emerged around this time in history.

But then again, this is nothing new. Even from the Viking era we possess testimonies about drunk and lazy warriors who hang around all day, annoying everybody around them. Every recreational drug has the shadow side that it motivates certain individuals that act against their self-interest.

This is where magic mushrooms differ. They emerged not from a *recreational* context (although some of the effects they cause might be pleasant in themselves), but from a *shamanistic* context. In that sense, they share a common root with many traditional medicinal compounds and herbal concoctions. The difference is that the type of healing that mushrooms were expected to cause is largely *mental* instead of physical. Given limited and seasonal availability, mushrooms were used at certain collective occasions, as far as we can ascertain.

This use of psychedelic substances is a world away from modern, recreational, and above all omnipresent drugs, even while magic mushrooms are now sold as recreational commodities. For one thing, it points to a certain potential that resides in them, and that we do not find in alcohol or modern hard drugs. Interestingly, only marijuana and mescaline seem to approach the kind of psychological effects that mushrooms exert. And it is easily visible. Alcohol removes boundaries and causes in some cases rather serious aggressive behavior. Likewise, combine modern party drugs with overstimulation, stroboscope light, and loud noise and the results can get out of hand rather rapidly. Contrariwise, both magic mushrooms and marijuana induce a kind of contemplative state.

If you would like to experience the difference, visit a bar where the guests have already had their fair share of alcoholic drinks, and compare the atmosphere with that

of a coffee shop where visitors have had a joint or two. The difference between the egocentric, machismo-driven alcoholic rush, and the broadly (if somewhat giggly) contemplative mood induced by marihuana (or mushrooms) couldn't be bigger.

When we speak of psychedelic experiences, or a psychedelic state of mind, we often unconsciously think of people who are "out of their minds," out of control, who have taken leave of their senses or who wantonly and compulsively have to escape reality. Alternatively, we think of people who experience a psychotic break or seizure.

Neither of these conceptions does any justice to what I regard as the true meaning and existential significance of the psychedelic experience induced by magic mushrooms. Of course, there are some people who *do* lose their mind when taking magic mushrooms. There are quite good reasons for this, and those who sell magic mushrooms in Amsterdam know that hapless tourists who take them without considering what they are doing will encounter trouble later on. Often, these tourists have never experienced a psychedelic hallucination; or they are tired, excited, jetlagged, and/or have used other kinds of drugs. If they also have any serious anxieties or unresolved psychological issues, and they use psychedelics in an overstimulated, unknown environment, then they unwittingly combine all the contributing factors to a very, very bad trip in all senses of the word.

So, barring cases in which the cause of "losing one's mind" is all too clear, we can see that *losing* one's mind is absolutely not the point of the psychedelic experience. Instead, it is *using* one's mind that magic mushrooms encourage. The accompanying "losing touch with reality" is not just a fading away of all the everyday chores and worries. This is indeed what happens when one uses drugs like alcohol. Reality in its drabness and misery is "blocked out" for a moment, as the alcoholic rush creates a momentary diversion. But once the rush is over, reality itself returns even more forcefully, thereby inducing again the painful desire to escape it, and keeping the alcohol habit going.

Instead, the psychedelic experience deepens and extends reality; it does not remove or blur it but instead supercharges it. I will have more to say about this aspect later, but it will suffice to note here that "losing one's mind" has little to do with psychedelics.

As for the second misconception, the error is even more serious. People who experience a psychotic break or seizure seemingly lose a sense of control, or at least control of the kind they feel is relevant. Indeed, a psychotic break or seizure may involve altered visions of reality, hallucinations, loss of orientation, and sense of time and place. But the essence, I think, lies in its involuntary, panic-stricken, deforming and ultimately traumatizing character. Here, it will suffice once again to note that

confounding psychedelic experiences with psychotic episodes is a first-class category mistake.

All this does not preclude the possibility that for an on-looker, the behavior of someone experiencing a trip may seem odd. Bouts of laughter, intensely staring at an object, staring into space, etc. might not make sense to the observer. But then, the behavior of drunk people often seems strange to the sober onlooker. We can even pursue this parallel further and think of cultural habits that present themselves as utterly strange to us. In an early example of comparative anthropology, De Montaigne discussed with great pleasure the customs of faraway peoples and delighted in noticing how odd we ourselves actually are. Acerbically, and in a similar vein, Nietzsche noted that the movements of dancers looked erratic to the on-lookers because they could not hear the music.

“Hearing the music”, then, is the key to understanding the dancers’ response to it. But what kind of “mental music” is playing in the psychedelic state of mind?

3. A Preliminary Phenomenology of Psychedelic Experience

If you close your eyes now, two things will happen. First, you cannot read this text any longer. And second, and in the absence of text or any visual input from the external world, the imaginative capacities of our mind takes center stage. Notice that the “black” on the back of your eyelids is not tranquil or serene. Multiple colored lines, dots, and shapes—so-called “form constants” or, if the visual system is stimulated while your eyes are shut, phosphenes – play on that surface. Once, while discussing this with friends, we noticed that all of us experienced different recurring forms, patterns, and shapes. So, strangely enough—and I encourage you to try this out yourself—you have a certain familiarity with the shapes you encounter in that realm behind the eyelids. The intensity, direction of movement, and speed of these shapes can vary. If you have a fever, or if you are tired, or if you are anxious or excited, they might behave differently than usual.

This is the first phenomenological encounter when taking magic mushrooms. All of a sudden, when you close your eyes, these vaguely familiar patterns begin to organize themselves. I am well aware of the rather peculiar way in which I am putting this, but this is—honest to Husserl—how it seems. It’s not that the patterns change in an arbitrary manner. Instead, they seemingly actively to coalesce into broadly ordered, dynamic and organic patterns that possess a higher degree of order and intelligibility.

What happens next is that these two-dimensional patterns become three-dimensional. And I mean this not just in the purely geometric sense of “acquiring an additional dimension.” Instead, they organize themselves in rapid successions that not only

evoke depth and distance, but that also cause the lived body to *feel* that depth and distance. So, the visual information causes a physical, felt change in proprioception, hence in how the lived body orients and anchors itself in space. Or, is it the other way around, and the lived body is stimulated so that it creates different patterns of visual information? I am not sure, but there is an interesting speculation to be made here, to which I return in section 4.

With this, the sense of inner scale changes dramatically. We may sometimes feel that we're "trapped in our heads" too much, for instance, when pondering a problem for a prolonged period of time. But with magic mushrooms comes the liberating realization that the interior of the head is a rather big place to explore: so big that you did not have the faintest idea about its farthest reaches. Or rather: you knew it intimately as a child, but you forgot it when you grew up. In a dynamic succession of landscapes, patterns, color changes, images, experiences, and sounds, the magic mushroom trip takes you literally on a tour of the landscape of your own psyche, communicated largely via patterns, colors, associations that are triggered, imaginal fragments that appear and disappear, as well as continuously zooming in and out from detail to panorama, and back again. The detail of a pattern seems to grow fractals, for instance, and all of a sudden, it turns into a highly detailed and fantastic landscape. Zooming out once more, this landscape turns into a panoramic, bird's-eye view painted in the most brilliant of colors, only to morph into a new pattern more complicated and unexpected than the first one.

If you open your eyes, a completely different transformation happens. The environment itself seems to come alive, with the light appearing more intensely, vividly, and in a more saturated way—to some extent, this visual effect can be explained by the pupils dilating due to the psychoactive compounds. Ordinary objects acquire a multitude of meanings, that is, possible interpretations. For example, three books stacked on top of each other convey a tectonic expression rarely found in even the most sophisticated of buildings; the light of the setting sun playing on the wall opens out into a world of patterns you never knew existed. A line drawn on paper seems to become alive and moving under the tip of your pen, creating multiple meanings as it unfolds itself.

Close your eyes again, and the trip through your mind resumes, but once the trip advances further, the images become more cinematic, and less pattern-like. Imagine for a moment that you are employed in the art department of the Avatar movie franchise, and you experience that imaginary world in real-life, from different viewpoints, with a degree of creativity you did not know existed, and with the agency to massage and nudge the images that appear. In short, you experience your very own and fully natural creative agency in full force, and with an intensity you cannot—in the most literal sense of the word—comprehend.

Interesting things happen not merely in the center of the visual field. In low doses and in the initial stages of the trip, peripheral perception increases. Indeed, it has been argued that this feature provided an evolutionary advantage to our monkey-like ancestors who included magic mushrooms in their diet. After all, when you focus slightly more on movements that appear at the edge of the visual field, you might outsmart the approaching predator in a way that's unavailable to your unlucky, mushroom-averse colleague. As the trip advances, some very interesting things happen at the edge of the visual field. If you turn your eyes sideways, you see that "blanks" appear.

We can compare it to a glitch in a video game from the early 2000s. In a 3D game like Quake, Tomb Raider, or Unreal, a careless level editor could unintentionally provide the player with an opportunity to run into the limits of the programmed world. So, you would encounter a flat, unadorned plane without any textures, because the programmers never assumed the player would get there, or some other strange visual effect. Something like that occurs also when the capacity of the brain is largely involved in processing the hallucinogenic input. I'll discuss various links between this phenomenon and the philosophy of mind in the next section.

After a while, the hallucinogenic effects decrease, and slowly, slowly, everyday reality re-enters the scene again. There is a hint of wistful melancholy in this process: all of a sudden, the world seems to flatten out, to become less colorful, to lose its manifold character. But—very unlike alcohol—the urge at this point is *not* to take another dose in order to stop this process of "coming down to earth" again.

If I had to describe the state of mind immediately after a trip, I'd compare it to the state of mind one experiences after a very deep and rewarding meditation session. There is a feeling of deep connectedness, intense gratitude, a pure joy of being alive, an intense creativity burning at the heart of being and a feeling of participating in the cosmos.

At the heart of all these feelings is a deep and stable tranquility, usually described as "centeredness." The essential difference between the tranquility one experiences after meditation, and what one experiences after a magic mushroom trip, is that after a trip, the mind seems positively reeling with creative potential. Let's compare it to the feeling of having an inspirational moment while writing out an idea. While writing, one realizes all of a sudden, the creative potentials that a line of thinking can hold. Confronted with this promise, a rush of vital motivation courses through body and mind alike.

Indeed, we find many such inspirational instances of this in the lives of artists. Here, I'd like to single out the case of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke. In so-called "dictations," Rilke claimed to receive his poems from an inspirational realm beyond everyday

experience. In a particular intense episode, Rilke finished his magisterial *Duino Elegies* over several weeks in February 1922, often frantically working until deep in the night. Whatever you might think of this episode, it is clear that an intense and almost superhuman motivational drive is part-and-parcel of it. Rilke worked until exhaustion forced him to retire to bed and finally get some sleep, having pushed his body and mind to the very limits of their capacities.

Such a vital motivation is part of the essentially embodied mental state after a trip. The feeling is somewhat euphoric, but also undirected. It is an urge to create and invent, yet the body is in no state to put this intention into action (trust me on this...). Luckily, this optimistic and forward-driven creative urge becomes part of one's mindset in the weeks following the trip. It seems that the Native Americans who used the magic mushrooms traditionally claimed that the effects were tangible for three months after the trip. I cannot confirm or deny this claim, but it could be easily investigated by means of a controlled clinical study.

Interestingly, as I mentioned in passing above, the urge after a trip is *not* to take another dose of mushrooms. Via a serotonin-based feedback mechanism, the body becomes far less receptive to psilocybin directly after a trip, so daily use of mushrooms is out of the question. But most importantly, even while there is a wistful melancholy that accompanies the departure from the psychedelic realm, reality does not (re)appear as ugly, empty, or meaningless.

And this is of the utmost importance. It seems to me that alcohol and many other recreational drugs function as stimulants in the short term, but as depressants in the long term. They cause the condition they claim to remedy. In turn, users of these drugs feel often compelled to use them to escape an unbearable reality, only to be confronted with it again once the sedative effects wear off. Magic mushrooms, on the other hand, suffuse reality with *more* meaning, *more* depth, and *more* purpose. It is as if the effects experienced during the trip linger as an essentially embodied mental after-image for weeks on end. It's not that one is high or stoned all the time; instead, it is just much easier to see the beauty and joy in one's surrounding world.³

4. Elaborations

In the previous sections, I indicated a few times that I would return to some or another theme in more depth. In this section, I make good on those indications. But it's important to make it explicit that what I present here are only speculations and associations that strike me as plausible. Nevertheless, and once again in pursuit of real philosophy, I would like to formulate a few arguments about the workings of

³ For an in-depth discussion on the discussion on the phenomenology of the psychedelic, see (Sheldrake, 2021: esp. ch. 5).

psychoactive compounds in general and of magic mushrooms in particular. Each point is preceded by the relevant passage from the text above.

Elaboration 1

The psychedelic experience deepens and extends reality; it does not remove or blur it but instead supercharges it. "Losing one's mind" has little to do with psychedelics.

From its very introduction in Western societies, psychedelics had a fraught relationship with governments. This applies especially to any psychedelics that had the potential to expand reality beyond the customary boundaries of human experiences, but that also had the effect of inducing a reflective state. The innocent question "why would we spend our lives at a boring 9-to-5 job if we can explore psychic space instead?" is enough to rattle lawmakers, moralists and business-owners alike. The strategies that these groups have deployed to paint the effects of psychedelics and its users in the most ghastly of colors have been remarkably consistent throughout Western history. The users of psychedelics have been reviled as layabouts, dangerous utopians, half-mad bohemians, violent thugs and individuals with an inferior moral character to boot. The most interesting fact is that the only drug known to boost tendencies to violence, depression, addiction, and moral deterioration generally, namely alcohol, has only been prohibited for short amounts of time, but has consistently been part of Western culture.

Nevertheless, the core argument against any other psychedelic has always been that it entraps its users in a fantasy world that is dangerous to inhabit; and its close correlate, that those taking psychedelics lose their mind, become mentally unstable, are looking for cheap forms of escapism, and resorted to psychedelics because they were mentally unstable to start with.

This is a myth. The psychedelic experience shifts the position of everyday reality with regard to the observer. There is indeed a displacement going on, but one that is very unlike the blurring of reality induced by alcohol. The alcoholic rush boosts the ego and blurs out any details that are seen as irrelevant, even to the point that one cannot walk any longer. The ego-based character and the weakening of inhibitions leads to behavior ranging from mildly annoying the people sitting at the neighboring table to outright violence.

By contrast, the psychedelic experience enriches the experience of everyday reality to such a degree that it appears as if what we customarily perceive is a mere top layer, and not even a particularly interesting one at that. Instead, it appears to me that psychedelics (re)position the top layers of reality with regard to the hidden layers that underlie it. It does so by supercharging the imagination in real-life, causing reality to appear more fascinating, self-renewing, living, organic, meaningful and colorful than

it was before. If anything, psychedelics hands us reality back in all its fullness, instead of blurring it. It does so through unlocking the fully natural capacity for continuous creativity that we all to some degree possess.

I spoke deliberately about a “(re)positioning of layers.” Let’s view it as a reworking of the Kantian insight that “[one] orients [one]self geographically only through a subjective ground of differentiation” (Kant 2001: p. 9). We might here exchange “geographically” for “spatially.” The very subjective ground of understanding is constituted by our bodies, through which we make gestures and act on possibilities. But equally, our understanding shifts once our (attitudinal) position towards reality noticeably changes, and our entire orientation towards the world performs a kind of Gestalt-shift, through which figure and ground change places or exceed their linear relation altogether.

I have earlier alluded to this shift as “creative piety.” Using mushrooms seems to me the most direct pathway to experience a shift like this, although one should not think exclusively of it as a kind of Paulinian “conversion moment,” although this could very well occur. Instead, just like meditation, intensive sports, or losing oneself in creative work, mushrooms can induce a mental disposition that re-orient one’s understanding, and after which reality is viewed not just differently, but in which its complexity is more readily grasped. Like an image in which one can discern all kinds of shapes, it is hard to “unsee” certain features of reality, especially when they are experienced intensely during a psychedelic trip.

The trip effects a kind of epistemic after-image that colors and directs any subsequent encounters with reality. In turn, this newly acquired insight thought-shapes one’s attitude and the possibilities that appear as plausible live options. We can compare this to the kind of knowledge that is acquired by a medical doctor. While the doctor does not have all his knowledge directly accessible (or ready-at-hand), the presence of this accumulated body of knowledge leads to the formation of accurate judgement.

The doctor may glance at a patient, and what he sees may—even before he is self-consciously aware of it—shape and plot a preliminary judgement and even a course of action. Even a cursory glance can be an effective analytical instrument when the perceptual contents are flawlessly combined with a rich reservoir of background knowledge. A similar thought underlies Martin Heidegger’s existential tool-analysis, Michael Polanyi’s notion of tacit knowledge, and the Aristotelian notion of *phrōnesis* (practical knowledge) more generally.

Elaboration 2

What happens next is that these two-dimensional patterns [during a trip] become three-dimensional. And I mean this not just in the purely geometric sense of “acquiring an additional

dimension.” Instead, they organize themselves in rapid successions that not only evoke depth and distance, but that also cause the lived body to feel that depth and distance. So, the visual information causes a physical, felt change in proprioception, hence in how the lived body orients and anchors itself in space. Or, is it the other way around, and the lived body is stimulated so that it creates different patterns of visual information?

Each of us possesses to some degree the capacity for continuous creativity. For instance, you could imagine someone coming with a solution to a thorny problem by heuristically running various scenarios in his head. This is a form of conceptual imagination in action. I concoct various possible scenarios and compare them. But what if you could run all scenarios simultaneously, in real time, with a speed that leaves you breathless and with emotions and affects as well as with conceptual content, and supported by mental imagery as well?

All this cannot but exert effects on the body, which in turn are translated into new outputs. Usually, we are not deeply aware of the effect of our thinking on our bodies. This is exactly why a “eureka” moment stands out from the everyday course of things. It amounts to feeling the ecstatic effect of a good or illuminating thought on our body, resulting in feelings of elation, delight, and joy.

But if this process is sped up and intensified, the result is a trip in the literal sense, with your body taking you on a ride. The close connection between thought and mood is continuously experienced and can—due to continuous creation—be influenced and to some degree directed, as well as being experienced from an observer-like modus.⁴ The full-on experience of depth, distance, and movement becomes mentally supercharged. It is literally as if the mind is in full control of how space feels, and movement is felt. In other words: the fully embodied mind is placed fully in control, while the frontal lobe (the faculty responsible for deliberative reasoning) is suppressed in its analytical capacity.

Notably, the connection between thought and the proprioceptive positioning of the body is brought to the foreground of lived experience. Awe, ecstasy, fear, and all the other emotions that form a backdrop to the activity of thought and that we often uncritically relegate to the “unconscious” are turned into states that can be self-consciously evaluated and apprehended. Put differently, the use of psychedelics

⁴ McKenna makes a similar point, but his choice of words may cause confusion (McKenna, 2021: p. 292). He says that creativity is “observed and not expressed” during a trip. He is certainly right: the creative impulse during a trip seems to come from somewhere buried deep inside us, as if a well had been found. But this is somewhat different from the creative agency experienced while making a painting, sketching, or sculpting. These expressions of creativity require deliberately applied technique and attention, and fully involve the analytical mind. But the trip simply “happens” to someone, and while one can guide and steer, to some degree, what happens, the entire experience feels like an encounter rather than a performance.

seems to widen the scope of deliberative reason without constraining it to analytical reasoning. Simultaneously, the feelings and emotions that are encountered by deliberative reason are not rationalized away, and nor do they lose their affective impact. Whereas we are used to opposing reason (*Verstand*) and feeling (*Gefühl*), psychedelics conjoin them into a harmonious constellation in which they both exist without blocking each other out.

In everyday circumstances, one must really go to great lengths to mute or disable the active frontal lobe and the overriding voice of deliberative reason (the frontal lobe is nicknamed “the big snooze” for a reason) as it can block out a great deal of emotional information, even leading to a variety of physical complaints. Usually, breathing techniques or meditation are required to tune down the frontal lobe temporarily.

We are not used to thinking about feelings as a form of information. We don’t usually interpret feelings as signals, but more like illustrations of a certain pre-existing mental state. (I cry, *because* I am sad, I laugh *because* I am happy). Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations* went to great lengths to find out how supposedly private sensations translate into communicable concepts—alas, with no definitive result. However, our everyday language is full of hints about bodily communication: “He makes my skin crawl”; “I got goosebumps from listening to her speech”; “This behavior makes me sick.” Quite literally, the body is providing information, but it does so in a thoroughly non-propositional sense.

In a psychedelic trip, the tortuous, winding, hiking trail that connects emotion, information and analytical reason becomes a highway. For this reason, many individuals experience a mental breakthrough during a psychedelic trip. It is as if all a faculties and capacities of the body are fully aligned to promote optimal and indeed revealing communication. Is it a coincidence that there are multiple links between astrological theories in which planetary bodies are aligned in certain constellations, and psychedelic rites that align the various capacities of the body? It might be a speculation, but maybe primitive humans had an inkling of the complexity of our bodies and looked for a close analogy of its workings to the night skies. Given the mythical worldview that our ancestors entertained about Nature at large, this seems to me a possibility. Perhaps they theorized an ontological encounter between the rhythms of our bodies and those of the cosmos, inspiring them to celebrate perceivable cosmic events like summer and winter solstices.

Note that this breakthrough experience need not in itself be pleasant. If one has unresolved trauma and has suppressed it, such events may equally well surface. However, even in such cases that may be psychologically challenging, there is little doubt on my mind, that they are in the long run existentially rewarding.

Returning now to the idea of re-orienting oneself in thinking: perhaps psychedelics provide an answer to how to achieve such a re-orientation. **First**, psychedelic experience must be an essentially embodied experience. It cannot be and therefore is not a purely intellectual exercise in which some analytical cognitive module “makes sense” of incoming data. Instead, the psychedelic experience is fully felt and essentially embodied. Without the visceral, bodily aspect, the entire existential import of the trip and its re-orienting character would phenomenologically flatten out, and the trip would not be more interesting than watching a movie at the cinema. **Second**, psychedelic experience cannot do without the felt agency of the active imagination to orient oneself. If anything, the psychedelic trip places one’s imaginative agency at the very core of the experience, even to such a degree that the experience is overwhelming:

Bizarre ideas, often hilariously funny, curious insights, some seeming godlike in their profundity, shards of memories and free-form hallucinations all clamour for attention. (McKenna 2021: 292).

Third, it cannot be achieved without changing and moving. To be moved, literally, is an emotional experience, and so is a psychedelic trip. Paradoxically (but not surprisingly), the best trips start with technique: fasting, then sitting in a softly-lit room in a safe and quiet environment with your eyes closed. Preferably, meditate beforehand and make sure the mind is as empty as possible. But it is the immobilization of the body that focuses the mind and concentrates the attention. In such a state, the trip itself (a term already richly suggestive of pilgrimage, journeys, exploration, sequential events and faraway destinations) constitutes the ultimate experience of “being moved” while simultaneously being the authorial agent and prime mover of the trip.

Elaboration 3

There is definitely a link to philosophy of mind. Notably Daniel Dennett and Stanislas Dehaene have formulated elaborate theories on how the brain processes information. Dennett’s so-called Multiple Draft theory is—simply put—that out of a mass of incoming sense data, series of successive and overlapping judgements are being created. So, the mind is like a busy newspaper editor who selects and orders events that will be considered. Notwithstanding the fact that many more events happened that day, the editor decides what is important and edits the paper in such a way that a certain image appears.

My speculation is that the brain-on-mushrooms is too busy with the imaginal workload, and that the main editor is overworked for the time being. The result is indeed a literal “lack of judgement.” The brain no longer fills in the blanks but instead leaves them be. In a normal, sober situation, the brain would have extrapolated from incoming perceptual input, and would have generated a seamless, high-res perceptual

picture. But now, the brain does not perform this capacity, letting parts of the judgment-based image fall apart.

However, while the faculty of judgment is overworked (most likely due to a decrease of activity in the frontal lobe), the faculty of imagination is having a field day. This is probably why one has no inclination at all to judge when tripping on mushrooms. Things are just as they are, and judging is neither needed nor desired. Interestingly, the wide variety of materials that the imagination encounters increases the connections in the brain enormously. This fact certainly helps to explain the creativity and spontaneity of the visions and ideas that keep appearing during the trip.

Dennett took Turing's idea of a "workspace" as inspiration for his multiple Draft model (Dennett, 1993). The concept is simply that in a targeted processing area, data, events, and actions are ordered in such a way that meaningful patterns emerge or certain (mental) actions can be carried out. Neuroscientist Bernard Baars (Baars, 1996, 1997) extended this idea into the realm of neuroscience and has proposed the idea of a "global working space." The idea is roughly similar to the cache memory in a computer: the computer cannot access all memory at once, since the "accessing" capacity is limited. However, it keeps a small quantity of memory space free for items that are often needed or that will be needed in the near future.

Likewise, the mind cannot access all memories, images, ideas and speculations at once. It would simply result in mental chaos and use too much capacity. The global workspace serves as a "working room" where the material that is related to the task one works on or focuses on is kept close by (Dehaene, 2014). Compare it to sitting in the reading room of a library: you cannot read all the books at once, but you may ask the librarian to fetch some volumes on a certain topic for you. These volumes serve as references non a given focus area that you can use quickly, and that may lead to new ideas or insights that can be retrieved at a later time.

Psychedelics have the strange effect of exponentially enlarging and deepening the global working space as well whatever retrieval mechanisms we use for retrieving, ordering, and connecting information, tapping into the deepest recesses of the mind with a speed and spontaneity that is breathtaking. The downside is that at that very moment, you can do very little to put the idea into practice; or, alternatively, that really interesting ideas and vision disappear with the same speed as with which they arrived.

These speculations are to some degree borne out by scientific studies: the brain on psilocybin lights up like a Christmas tree, multiplying connections and the neural firings. In a study by Petri et al. (Petri *et al.*, 2014). A group of test subjects was provided with a placebo compound, while a test group was provided with psilocybin.

The brain activity of both groups was mapped and visualized, as has been depicted below:

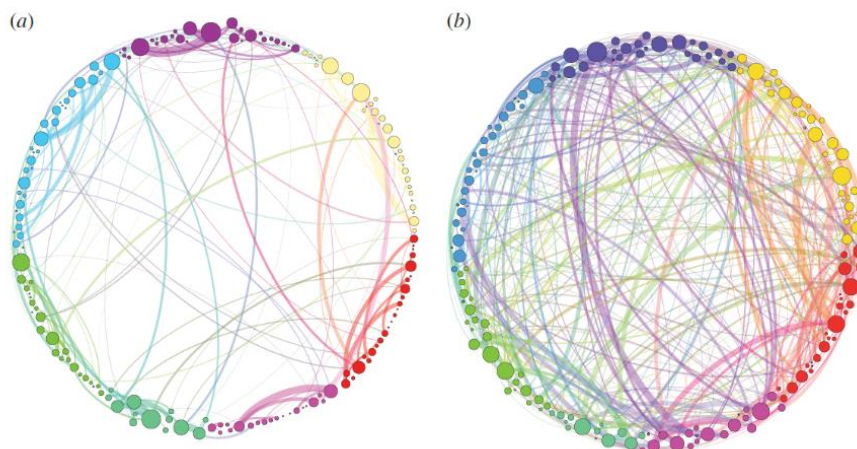


Figure 6. Simplified visualization of the persistence homological scaffolds. The persistence homological scaffolds $\mathcal{H}_{\text{pla}}^p$ (a) and $\mathcal{H}_{\text{psi}}^p$ (b) are shown for comparison. For ease of visualization, only the links heavier than 80 (the weight at which the distributions in figure 5a bifurcate) are shown. This value is slightly smaller than the bifurcation point of the weights distributions in figure 5a. In both networks, colours represent communities obtained by modularity [49] optimization on the placebo persistence scaffold using the Louvain method [50] and are used to show the departure of the psilocybin connectivity structure from the placebo baseline. The width of the links is proportional to their weight and the size of the nodes is proportional to their strength. Note that the proportion of heavy links between communities is much higher (and very different) in the psilocybin group, suggesting greater integration. A labelled version of the two scaffolds is available as GEXF graph files as the electronic supplementary material. (Online version in colour.)

Figure 1: Brain connectivity on a placebo (left) and psilocybin (right). (Petri *et al.*, 2014)

As the authors of the paper contend:

This [finding] supports our idea that psilocybin disrupts the normal organization of the brain with the emergence of strong, topologically long-range functional connections that are not present in a normal state. The two key results of the analysis of the homological scaffolds can therefore be summarized as follows (i) there is an increased integration between cortical regions in the psilocybin state and (ii) this integration is supported by a persistent scaffold of a set of edges that support cross modular connectivity probably as a result of the stimulation of the 5HT2A receptors in the cortex (Petri et al., 2014).

So, the psilocybin does not only establish more connections, but it establishes connections between regions that are scarcely or not at all connected. Given what we know about the plasticity of the brain, such episodes have lasting (and indeed literally mind-shaping and thought-shaping) effects that permeate affect and cognition for prolonged periods of time. We can now also see why the neural configuration induced by psilocybin is so potent: on the one hand, the imagination has a field day, while the main editor is not engaged in judging, and the entire brain is involved and massively activated. For this reason, psychedelics are now prescribed for those who suffer from

treatment-resistant depression. It seems that they can bring about a breakthrough that modern medicine is currently unable to (Jarral, 2023).⁵

Not coincidentally, it is notoriously hard to describe what transpires during a trip. Part of this difficulty lies in the fact that—as per the Huxley quote with which we began—our everyday cognition is indeed a “measly trickle” of processing the massive amount of data that our brains receive, via the senses or the body more generally. As Terrence McKenna describes it:

Major conceptual and linguistic difficulties are involved in conveying to people precisely what this experience is like.... These experiences range from mild tingling in the feet to being in titanic and alien realms where the mind boggles and language fails. And one feels the presence of utterly unspeakable, the wholly Other. Memories fall, gritty and particulate, like the snows of yesteryear. Opalescence anticipates neon, and language gives birth to itself. Hyperbole becomes impossible. And therein lies the importance of discussing these matters (McKenna, 2021: p. 291).

Wittgenstein was certainly right that we are bewitched by our language, and his insight applies especially in describing the psychedelic experience. Our language, after all, has evolved to function optimally within the field of reduced cognition that Huxley describes. It aids survival, communication, and, to some degree, conceptualization. But it fails utterly to grasp the essence of what McKenna described as the “howling Tao”: the experience of glancing directly into the processual essence of the cosmos, and indeed the (implicate) order behind the physical world. Concepts do scant justice to what can be found in the psychic realm, and the essentially non-conceptual takes center stage.

5. Conclusion

Taking psychedelic experience seriously, as real-philosophical evidence, implies both theoretical and practical re-orientations in the full Kantian senses of those terms. Real philosophy cannot merely sit behind a desk or in an armchair and play around with words. Studying imagery, processualism, and the essential embodiment of our minds, and resolutely taking a cognitive-somatic approach to our thinking as a whole, are all absolutely necessary if we are to familiarize ourselves with the psychic realm in all its richness, formative existential power, and life-shaping impact.

⁵ I have some hypotheses as to why this is so, but those would lead us too far from the main themes of this essay. But in any case, it has to do with the idea of taking medication: they do not involve the brain, but subdue and mute it, blocking bodily signals that are of vital importance.

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