

The Philosophy of Psychedelic Transformation

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## ABSTRACT

Recent scientific research arguably confirms the existence of a remarkable phenomenon: durable psychological benefit to an individual resulting from a single ingestion of a psychedelic drug. In this thesis by publication I ask what exactly is going on in such cases of 'psychedelic transformation'. The thesis is situated in the context of a resurgence of interest in psychedelics within neuroscience and psychiatry, and motivated by the need for philosophical examination of the foundations and results of this research program.

Two common claims in the literature on therapeutic and transformative uses of psychedelics are: (a) psychedelic experiences are a reliable means of knowledge acquisition or spiritual growth, and (b) such epistemic or spiritual benefits are centrally involved in psychedelics' psychological benefits. My aim is to show how such a conception of psychedelic transformation as an epistemic or spiritual process may be reconciled with philosophical naturalism. Naturalism denies the existence of non-natural or supernatural realities such as gods, souls, and immaterial minds. Naturalism is a very widespread view in philosophy today, and is supported by strong arguments.

However, there is a tension between naturalism and the epistemic or spiritual conception of psychedelic transformation, because many psychedelic users claim drug-facilitated knowledge of non-natural realities, such as a mystical 'universal consciousness'. One possible naturalistic response is to dismiss psychedelic users' claims of epistemic or spiritual benefit as mistaken. Here I offer an alternative, showing that we need not throw the epistemic/spiritual baby out with the non-naturalistic bathwater. I show that some kinds of psychedelic-induced epistemic and spiritual benefits are compatible with naturalism and plausibly involved in the drugs' transformative effects.

In 'The Philosophy of Psychedelic Transformation' I review evidence for psychological benefits of psychedelics and defend the claim that psychedelic transformation is unlike standard pharmacotherapies in centrally involving

meaningful conscious experiences. I give arguments for three kinds of epistemic benefits: knowledge by acquaintance of the mind's potential, knowledge by acquaintance of the contingency of the sense of self, and revitalised capacities for the acquisition of modal knowledge. In 'The Epistemic Innocence of Psychedelic States' I extend this work, arguing that whatever psychedelics' epistemic demerits, they offer reliable and sometimes unique access to substantial epistemic benefits, including indirect epistemic benefits resulting from psychological benefits. I argue that a balanced picture of the drugs' epistemic merits and demerits is essential to policy discussions about their uses.

In 'Naturalizing Psychedelic Spirituality' I argue that by disrupting mechanisms of self-representation in the brain, psychedelics engender transformative experiences of self-transcendence and mind-expansion which amount to a naturalistic form of spirituality. I propose that such naturalistic spirituality constitutes a viable response to existential anxiety resulting from a naturalistic worldview. Finally, in 'Anatomy of an Avatar: Ego Dissolution in Psychedelic Experiences', I (with Philip Gerrans) argue that such self-transcendent experiences result specifically from disruption to cognitive binding processes implemented by predictive models in the brain. This provides a mechanistic basis for some of the claims of epistemic and spiritual benefit defended earlier.

## DECLARATION

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree.

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### Publications:

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