

Toward a Psychedelic Theodicy: Psychedelic Biomedicine and the Concept of Risk

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ABSTRACT:

Biomedicine is insufficiently able to address “bad trips” and specifically negative entity encounters that psychedelic users regularly aver. To address the inadequacy of biomedicine to address this question, this essay proposes a turn toward other ontologies better equipped to understand these experiences and support patients. This paper presents a model/framework for contextualizing psychedelic experience through one such ontological turn: a psychedelic theodicy.

Introduction

Construed broadly, as I do here, a theodicy is an attempt to square the experience of malevolence and suffering with metaphysical conditions that are assumed to be fundamentally, well, loving. In Islam or Christianity, for example, theodicy is usually rendered in terms of reconciling the existence of a benevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent God with the existence of evil. While I do not have space here to make the case for the fundamental lovingness of existence, I take this as a premise for my argument.¹ Doing psychedelic theodicy is a practice

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¹ See, for a concise but fulsome account of the difference between scientific, mechanistic worldviews and relational, animist worldviews, Frédérique Apffel-Marglin, “Reflections on Modernity and the Eradication of Shamanism,” *Paradigm Explorer* (2023), 22. Apffel-Marglin describes animism as ontologies that hold that all being is fundamentally animated by something sacred and that is meaningfully connected—in other words, integrated, meaning made whole. I also wish to note that the term “animist” raises eyebrows in religious studies. I use it here in a sense situated by philosopher Peter Sjöstedt-Hughes in his Exeter Metaphysics Matrix and described by anthropologist Luis Eduardo Luna at the conference for which I wrote this paper. Elsewhere Luna has written: “Animism is not a philosophy, it’s not a religion; it’s a way to relate to the nonhuman world. We need to change our relationship with the nonhuman world. And it has to be a relationship – a two-way subjectivity, or intersubjectivity. Because the model we have right now, in which we are considered the superior intelligence and the owners of everything ... I know scholars will argue and tell me, oh no, it’s not exactly like that, etc. But unfortunately, in everyday life many people do think in those terms: we are superior, we can do whatever, the earth is full of just resources that we can use” (qtd. in Meistere 2021). Without romanticizing people and cultures who hold animist worldviews, I nevertheless agree with Luna in wanting to affirm that these are the least life alienated worldviews compared to the insentient third-person view of the cosmos brought about in Western modernity. Indeed, they have historically been the rule and mechanistic views the exception. Peter Sjöstedt-Hughes, “On The Need for Metaphysics in Psychedelic Therapy and Research,” *Frontiers in Psychology*, Volume 14 (2023).

of theorizing how and why a fundamentally loving, intelligent cosmos gives rise to experiences that are *not that* in the context of a psychedelic trip. Psychedelic theodicy allows one to explore a wide variety of questions and experiences that surface during a trip: death, desecration, meaninglessness, disconnection, encounters with apparently sinister, etc.

In what follows, I limit my scope to psychedelic users' encounters with entities experienced as malevolent. I will also limit my analysis to the context of psychedelic medicine. This narrowing defines a scope appropriate to the small space available here and, crucially, touches on the problems and difficulties that biomedicine is least equipped to address. Namely, how to support patients encountering negative entities during their psychedelic treatment without pathologizing, dismissing, or fetishizing these experiences. By entity encounter, I mean an expansive category of beings, mostly disembodied, that visit those under the influence of psychedelics. As anthropologist Graham St John writes about DMT entities:

“Reported entity encounters [include a] veritable transdimensional bestiarum, from teacher to archon, trickster to benevolent alien, machine elf to organic insectoid, monster to mother... Whether these are beings from higher dimensions or parallel universes, spirits of the dead, divine intermediaries of God (if not the creator him- or herself), archetypes from the collective unconscious, important messages communicated from our DNA, time travelers from the future, perinatal or past life phenomena ... the answers probably won't arrive anytime soon.”²

Before proposing a psychedelic theodicy to more adequately conceptualize encounters with this pantheon of entities, I first review how the biomedical model currently regards these encounters and related bad trips, with attention to the inadequacies therein.

Psychedelic Health Policy: Risk is to Safety as Strangeness is to Familiarity

Biomedical and drug regulatory systems are obsessed with a concept of “safety” that is narrow and inhumane. The system in Canada, for example, permits the sale and cultural celebration of alcohol, a class one carcinogen, but refuses access to toxicologically safe psilocybin on the grounds that psilocybin is too “risky” even for dying cancer patients.³ Paradoxically, Health

<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1128589>; Una Meister, “We Have to Rescue Animism: A Conversation with Colombian-born Anthropologist Luis Eduardo Luna,” *Spiriterritory* (2021), <https://spiriterritory.com/conversations/interviews/25427-we-have-to-rescue-animism/>.

² St John adds, “While ultimately elusive, the cause appears less important than the effect. This was Terence McKenna’s insight with regard to UFOs, as it surely will have been that of William James. It is not what they are that ultimately matters, but what they can do for us. This sentiment rings true for the cognate anomalies that are DMT entities. Rather than ask where they come from, it appears more fruitful to explore, whether on a scale of personal growth or consciousness evolution, the meaning and implications of the message.” Graham St John, “Exploring the Entheogenic Underground: An Interview with Graham St John,” interview by Julia Kent, *North Atlantic Books Blog*, December 8, 2015, HYPERLINK “<https://www.northatlanticbooks.com/blog/exploring-the-entheogenic-underground-an-interview-with-graham-st-john/>”<https://www.northatlanticbooks.com/blog/exploring-the-entheogenic-underground-an-interview-with-graham-st-john/>.

³ The Canadian House of Commons petition regarding Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD) care was registered by the clinical ethicist Dr. Brendan Leier, who notes that “it is paradoxical and unethical to allow physicians to provide MAiD for their patients while preventing the same physicians from treating their end of life distress with psilocybin.” The government’s response to Leier cites “risks” and directs would-be palliative psilocybin-assisted therapy patients to join a clinical trial (the opportunities for which are vanishingly rare) or to use the SAP (the Special Access Program), which

Canada offers Medical Assistance in Dying to the same terminal patients. Risk and safety are here focused on the *predictability* of the physical damage from a substance rather than the *kind* or *amount* of damage.

Safety assessments are thus revealed as ciphers for the cultural acceptance of the substance. Alcohol's risks, the thinking goes, must be minor if it is so casually used, while psychedelics' risks must be as deep as the secrecy around underground use and as extreme as the War on Drugs.

Such disproportionate concerns about safety also stem from the unpredictability of the psychedelic experience. Compared to the predictable woozy phenomenology of drunkenness, these mercurial, soul-revealing substances raise issues health policy is poorly equipped to handle. Challenging psychedelic experiences may initially appear risky or dangerous because they confer psychological and metaphysical disclosures a patient is unprepared for or unsupported in. Yet, such experiences can turn out to be as valuable as unequivocally positive experiences. Psychedelic researchers, such as William Richards and Roland Griffiths, emphasize that participants often rate their most challenging psychedelic experiences among their most meaningful.⁴ Health policy, concerned with deflecting legal challenges and avoiding financial and legal liability, has little incentive to understand such potentials.

Biomedicine assesses safety and risk based on its mechanistic worldview of scientific physicalism, which sets the evidentiary standard for what is publicly accessible, measurable, and repeatable. Metaphysical experiences of numinosity, subtle beings, and direct knowledge of ultimate reality ("gnosis") are off the table. Any challenges associated with a trip—acute pain, fear, somatic discomfort, or ensuing instability—are regarded as contained to the confines of the patient's mind. So, too, any entities one may encounter.

Philosopher of psychedelics Chris Letheby articulates (and advocates) the worldview underlying biomedicine when he claims that "mind" is an evolved product of material, biological processes and can, therefore, only know about *natural elements, principles, and relations of the kind studied by the natural sciences*, meaning that what appears to psychedelic experiencers as outside of this materialist frame is only ever a "metaphysical hallucination."⁵ This position, called "metaphysical naturalism," denies reality to psychedelic experience, save for psychological reality. Thus, the 46 percent of ayahuasca takers, 36 percent of DMT takers, 17 percent of LSD takers, and 12 percent of psilocybin takers who reported "encounters with suprahuman or spiritual entities" in a 2015 survey of 800 psychonauts must only have been encountering projections of their own mind.

denied the application of the terminally ill Thomas Hartle after 511 days. Brendan Leier, "E-4334 (Health)," *Petition e-4334 – Petitions*, June 19, 2023, <https://www.ourcommons.ca/petitions/en/Petition/Details?Petition=e-4334>; Hannah Spray, "Health Canada Denies Sask. Man Permission to Continue Magic Mushroom Therapy | CBC News," *CBC News*, March 2, 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/health-canada-denies-terminally-ill-sask-man-permission-to-continue-magic-mushroom-therapy-1.6765386>.

⁴ William Richards, "William Richard on Psychedelic-Assisted Psychotherapy and Mystical Experiences," interview by Dave Bullard, *Psychotherapy.net*, 2017, <https://www.psychotherapy.net/interview/psychedelic-assisted-psychotherapy>; Sharday Mosurinjohn, Leor Roseman, and Manesh Girn, "Psychedelic-Induced Mystical Experiences: An Interdisciplinary Discussion and Critique," *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 14 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2023.1077311>.

⁵ Chris Letheby, *Philosophy of Psychedelics* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 2-3.

For metaphysical naturalists, a trip is just a brain observing the scrambling of its existing contents.⁶ Because biomedicine assumes this metaphysical model, it misses much of the value that can come from processing bad trips and their challenging sequelae. If there is nothing outside the material and the mind, then the patient can never learn about what scholar of religion Jeffrey Kripal (2024) calls the “vertical”—vertical meaning the ontological reality of what is “transcendent” in “a global sense of “up,” or “above,” or “outside” normal human experience and functioning.⁷ Patients must reduce their interpretation “to this or that horizontal dimension – to a social process; a political system; a historical context; a gendered, racial, or sexual identity; a psychological need; a biological instinct; a linguistic grammar; a neurological default system; or whatever the reigning reduction might be. All of these are helpful and illuminating.... None of them are adequate” to the *reality* of “the sheer ‘otherness’ or ‘sacred’ nature of these kinds of experiences.”⁸ Those under the sway of metaphysical naturalism are deprived of cultivating the potential of their capacities to perceive everything beyond that which has a simple spacetime location.⁹ As Wouter Hanegraaff, another scholar of religion, recently said, “Nothing unreal exists...anything we ever experience is real,” including so-called metaphysical hallucinations.¹⁰ Our task is to develop our capacities to engage them.

Biomedicine, because it misunderstands the risk of bad trips, also misunderstands their value. The myopic and defensive focus on protecting people from a frightening entity encounter or similar forecloses the practice opportunity to develop these capacities were such an encounter allowed, metaphysically contextualized, and supported with appropriate subtle practices.

Comparing Risk in the Worldviews of Scientific Physicalism vs. Animism

The biomedical view of what can happen in a trip (i.e., nothing metaphysical naturalism can’t model) undermines the potential of psychedelics for healing and holotropic development.¹¹ Such potentials, I argue, are actualized in animistic, numinous worldviews. These worldviews were common in the pre-modern world before “the scientific revolution” of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Western Europe, and they are still lived today in places where

⁶ Jules Evans, principal investigator of the Challenging Psychedelic Experiences Project, uses metaphysical naturalism in his analysis of psychedelic experience reports. Evans holds that “non-materialist theories of reality” are “useless” because they do not “lead to significant new inventions or predictions.”⁶ “There’s a limit,” he writes, “to what we can know is genuinely and truly ‘out there’” in psychedelic experience. He sets that limit at anything “outside our own mind and body,” either by fiat or by agreeing with the scientific reductionists. The 11 percent of 2561 DMT-takers from a survey who described encountering a “demon,” “devil,” or “monster” must be expressing psychiatric disorder symptoms in poetic terms. Jules Evans, “The uselessness of non-materialist theories of reality,” *Medium*, November 11, 2022, <https://julesevans.medium.com/the-uselessness-of-non-materialist-theories-of-reality-9cec763378d4>; Jules Evans, “Encounters with negative entities,” *Ecstatic Integration*, September 8, 2023, <https://www.ecstaticintegration.org/p/encounters-with-negative-entities>.

⁷ Jeff Kripal, *How to Think Impossibly: About Souls, UFOs, Time, Belief, and Everything Else* (Chicago University Press, 2024), 126.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁹ Anthony N. Perovich, “Innate Mystical Capacities and the Nature of the Self,” in *The Innate Capacity: Mysticism, Psychology and Philosophy*, ed. Robert K. Forman (Oxford University Press, 1998), 213-230.

¹⁰ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “A Poem at the Edge of Reality,” *Creative Reading*, December 2023, <https://wouterjhanegraaff.blogspot.com/2023/12/a-poem-at-edge-of-reality.html>.

¹¹ Holotropic meaning “moving toward wholeness.” For more, see Stanislov Grof, *Way of the psychonaut: Encyclopedia for inner journeys. Volumes one and two* (MAPS, McNaughton & Gunn, 2019).

colonization has not eradicated or precluded the possibility of working with a conscious, creative, and meaningfully interconnected explicate order. More specifically, I am thinking of shamanic, occult botanical, magical, spiritual, and other esoteric modes of working with psychedelics and related technologies of consciousness. Certain Peruvian ayahuasca traditions, for example, require submitting—though terrified—to a path of shamanic¹² initiation at the will of discarnate beings to protect one’s community from evil sorcery.¹³ Similarly, the occult herbalism of British Sabbatic Craft tradition leads participants to follow a plant’s instructions, communicated via tutelary spirit-connectivity (“phytognosis”) or by a brutal “reckoning of the poison,” in order to know and use the plant better.¹⁴

These worldviews do not obviate nor ignore danger. Instead they offer metaphysically sophisticated models for interpreting the causes, meanings, enabling constraints, and purposes of challenging psychedelic experiences. Ayahuasca shamanism, for instance, acknowledges spiritual forces—human, plant, fungal, disembodied, and entities of all sorts—that are sinister, dark, evil, and malevolent (or at least seem to be). The sinister and the challenging become more complicated when removed from the biomedical metaphysic. Animist conceptions of these challenging experiences suggest a theodicy I propose should be adopted by psychedelic healthcare, as I articulate in the following section.

Reframing “Risk of Adverse Events” with a “Psychedelic Theodicy”

One line of modeling we can pursue in developing a psychedelic theodicy is to imagine challenging psychedelic experiences and the beings encountered there in terms of ecology. Specifically, we might view entity encounters as occurring within an ecosystem in which the psychedelic user exists alongside and in relationship with differently carnate entities. In this

¹² Religious studies has sustained a long-simmering tension around the word shamanism. Mircea Eliade introduced the concept as a universal category in 1951; the category has been populated by scholars according to the times. Jeremy Narby (1998) put it this way, “When anthropology was a young science, unsure of its own identity and unaware of the schizophrenic nature of its own methodology, it considered shamans to be mentally ill. When ‘structuralist’ anthropology claimed to have attained the rank of science, and anthropologists busied themselves finding order in order, shamans became creators of order. When the discipline went into ‘poststructuralist’ identity crisis, unable to decide whether it was a science or a form of interpretation, shamans started exercising all kinds of professions. Finally, some anthropologists began questioning their discipline’s obsessive search for order, and they saw shamans as those whose power lies in ‘insistently questioning and undermining the search for order.’” Some scholars call for abandoning it. I use the term shamanism for two reasons. Medical anthropologist Olivia Marcus has documented that *ayahuasca shamanism* “has become a term that refers to the entirety of the mestizo and globalized Indigenous ayahuasca-related practices, including *dietas*, *purgas*, and other processes that may not include the ingestion of ayahuasca” and the term “*chamán*” has been adopted by South American Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in reference to ayahuasca practices. Yulia Ustinova, interpreting alterations of consciousness in ancient Greece, notes that labeling people as shamans is “a simple way to call attention to their engagement in alterations of consciousness” (2018, 339). Olivia Marcus, “‘Everybody’s Creating It along the Way’: Ethical Tensions among Globalized Ayahuasca Shamanisms and Therapeutic Integration Practices,” *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* 48, no. 5 (June 6, 2023): 712–31.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/03080188.2022.2075201>; Yulia Ustinova, *Divine mania: Alterations of consciousness in ancient Greece* (Routledge, 2018), 339; Jeremy Narby, *The Cosmic Serpent: DNA and the Origins of Knowledge* (Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1999).

¹³ Frédérique Apffel-Marglin and Randy Chung Gonzales, *Initiated by the spirits: Healing the ills of modernity through shamanism, psychedelics and the power of the sacred* (Green Fire Press, 2022).

¹⁴ Daniel Schulke, “Axioms of Phytognosis,” in *Verdant Gnosis: Cultivating the Green Path*, Vol 5, eds. Catamara Rosarium, Marcus McCoy and Jenn Zahrt (Revelore Press, 2019), 177.

view, nature's amoral stance on relationships, even those of predator and prey, becomes instructive.

Like Predator and Prey

In any ecosystem, cycles of destruction and creation constantly take place. Plants remove and subsequently transform nutrients from the soil. The brain consumes the lion's share of the oxygen dutifully carried by the red blood cells, which the bone marrow worked so hard to make. Scaling up, sometimes we humans are the predators. We prey on (psychedelic) plants, fungi, and animals, even as we use them to pray. We may destroy and consume a plant, but we rarely consider this destroying evil. From the single plant's perspective, perhaps we are evil. We are like pests—from pestilence, meaning disease or plague. Yet, viewed from a species or ecological level, if the plant has been sustainably grown and harvested, our actions may also be, and be viewed by the plant as, healthful.¹⁵

From this vantage, I propose a psychedelic theodicy that understands psychedelic entity encounters similarly. This view encourages us to consider that the encounters we fear are not, in fact, part of a hostile “out there” but are, in some ways, familiar and continuous with our own unskillful, out-of-balance ecological relationships. We destroy, harm, and upset the planet because we have become alienated from it. This planetary bad trip is an encounter with our own indifference. So, too, perhaps those entities that seem frighteningly evil during a psychedelic trip are, in fact, only as sinister as the atrocities we commit in our ignorance, misattunement, and pain.¹⁶ If we shift our perspective to regard the entities threatening us as simply acting out their pain or showing us their profound, but not intentional, lack of attunement to our species, we see something remarkably familiar to our own relationships with the natural world.

Mutual Un/adaptedness

Differences can be dangerous. We may perceive this danger as intentional on the part of psychedelic entities and as essential to their nature. What if this moralizing is our misunderstanding? We attribute, for example, no malice to cacao for being toxic to dogs while being heart-opening for us. We simply are beings adapted to different conditions of life. As the occult botanist, Daniel Schulke writes:

The character, spirit or *genius* of the individual plants ... [are] an interactive ‘community’ with which one could hold discourse....To the true seeker, all gained of

¹⁵ “A pest and yet not a pest,” in the words of natural farmer and philosopher Masanobu Fukuoka, quoted in Stephen Harrod Buhner, *The secret teachings of plants: The intelligence of the heart in the direct perception of nature* (Bear & Co., 2004), 213.

¹⁶ Jeffrey J. Kripal writes, “There is too much to say ... around what I have called the traumatic secret. Trauma, after all, is a strong correlation of so much extreme religious experience. Happy, healthy people do not experience poltergeists. These alleged ghosts, as I have joked, never show up as rainbows, kittens, and friendly unicorns. They are always breaking, scratching, and screaming shit-projected trauma, suffering, and self-torture. This is why paranormal phenomena so commonly appear in or around near-death experiences, extreme illness, war, the evils of racism, and social suffering. Here is how [Kripal's interlocutor] Kevin puts the idea, always succinctly: ‘It's generally trauma that opens doors in the psyche. ... Since ‘trauma’ opens the doors more than anything, that's why ‘the Other’ tends to manifest as ‘evil’ and not ‘good.’ ... It took me freaking nearly forever to learn why the ‘Phenomenon’ is nearly universally ‘nasty’ and not ‘good.’ It's because the part of the human mind that brings it in is hurt and nasty. ... That's the simple truth to it.’” Jeffrey J. Kripal, *How to Think Impossibly: About Souls, UFOs, Time, Belief, and Everything Else*. (University of Chicago Press, 2023), 112.

the sensorium is of value, if only to learn what knowledge is not ultimately ours to hold.¹⁷

This same perspective is suggested by a psychedelic theodicy rooted in animist ecology. To understand encounters with entities during psychedelic experience is to recognize that difference is not always dangerous, and even when it is, it may not be due to evil. If entities seem to be “negatively judgmental” or “malicious,” or if the psychedelic user feels “energetically attacked or a harmful connection to the spirit world,” per some recent surveys on challenging psychedelic experiences,¹⁸ a psychedelic theodicy leads us to reframe this encounter in relational terms.

If we view these entities not as *bad* but as outside of right relationship with us, then the question driving our inquiry shifts from *Why is this entity evil* to *Why is our relationship broken?* Or *How may we relate?* Or the question may become: *If this entity is not for me, then what can I learn from its way of being? What happens if I regard it as, say, an embodiment of archetypal, amoral, cosmic force—like death and destruction are sometimes embodied in a certain God of a pantheon?* From this shift comes the possibility of entering into a new relationship with these beings—one that is predicated on the desire to better understand and better relate to one another.

Conclusion

Bad trips challenge us and reveal the constraints of how we relate to ourselves, each other, psychedelic substances, and the subtle energies or entities we might encounter. Beyond constraints, these experiences also reveal what our purposes together can be. A psychedelic theodicy asks us to take seriously bad trips and the negative entities that can accompany them. And, at the same time, to reimagine what these entities are and how we might come into relationship with them.

This approach stands in contrast to the typical biomedical mindset, which narrowly defines the psychedelic experience as existing solely within the individual’s psyche, thereby relegating negative entities to pathologies or hallucinations. With business as usual, strides can be made. Terminal cancer patients in psilocybin clinical trials can, for example, experience a reduction in depression and anxiety symptoms. However, if mainstream healthcare is to work skillfully with psychedelics and not reduce the vertical to the horizontal by psychologizing bad trips and denying reality to the entities encountered there, business is going to have to get a lot weirder than usual. Those working with psychedelics will have to learn to expose and articulate their own metaphysical assumptions, stop denying psychedelic users’ metaphysical experiences, and reckon with the metaphysical questions discussed above. Adopting a psychedelic theodicy, like the one outlined here for navigating entity encounters, offers patients and their caregivers a deeper apprehension of their own interiority and that of the world; it opens the possibility of new relations in an ecosystem that is far vaster and more entangled than metaphysical naturalism allows.

¹⁷ Daniel Schulke, “Axioms of Phytognosis,” in *Verdant Gnosis: Cultivating the Green Path*, Vol 5, eds. Catamara Rosarium, Marcus McCoy and Jenn Zahrt (Revelore Press, 2019), 161-179.

¹⁸ José Carlos Bouso et al., “Adverse effects of ayahuasca: Results from the Global Ayahuasca Survey,” *PLOS Global Public Health*, Vol. 2, No. 11 (2022), doi: [10.1371/journal.pgph.0000438](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pgph.0000438).