Are psychedelic drugs distorting?

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1. Introduction

What, exactly, is supposed to be wrong with the use of psychedelic drugs? One possible explanation might be that the use of psychedelic drugs is wrong because doing so is *illegal*. Presumably, however, this cannot be the whole explanation, since if it were, the problem would end if we ended prohibition – and that, it seems, is not a solution with which most opponents of psychedelics would be happy.

A more substantive explanation might be that it is wrong to use psychedelics because of the medical risks involved. Psychedelic drugs, however, have a low toxicity and addiction potential.[1] In a ranking of the harm potential, per user dose, of various drugs, published in *The Lancet*, psychedelics were ranked as much safer than alcohol.[2] This explanation, therefore, has an empirical shortcoming. It also has a normative shortcoming: We do not regard activities that involve much higher risks of harm (e.g. parashooting, mountaineering, and combat sports) as wrongful in any way close to the way in which the use of psychedelics is regarded as wrongful.

So where, exactly, is the problem supposed to lie in the case of psychedelic drug use? The worry that I will discuss in this chapter is that psychedelic drugs are *distorting*: that they work by cutting users off from reality, by making them see things that are not real and by believing things that are wrong.

Although this objection has, to my knowledge, never been considered explicitly and in detail, variants of are prevalent in writings about psychedelics. For examine, Michael Pollan, in considering the anxiety-relieving effects on LSD in terminally ill patients, writes the following:

> It's one thing to conclude [from having taken LSD] that love is all that matters, but quite another to come away from a therapy convinced that 'there is another reality' awaiting us after death … or that there is more to the universe—and to consciousness—than a purely materialist world view would have us believe. Is psychedelic therapy simply foisting a comforting delusion on the sick and dying?[3]

In a similar vein, Owen Flanagan and George Graham have argued that the cognitive effects produced by psychedelics are 'metaphysical hallucinations'.[4] In one of the harshest recent criticisms, Timothy Hsiao suggests that psychedelic drugs (alongside other drugs) 'impair, destroy, or otherwise frustrate the functioning of [one's] cognitive faculties'.[5]

On views like these, the mind-altering effects produced by psychedelics are like the effects produced on a TV screen by shaking the TV antenna. Although shaking the antenna might produce amusing lines and colours on the screen, and although some people would rather be amused by those lines and colours than to be confronted with the content of the program, the result is nevertheless a distorted signal.

Do psychedelics work by distorting users? In order to answer that question, I will start by briefly looking at some accounts of what psychedelic mind alterations can be like. Then I examine, in more detail, four different types of mind-alteration that are produced by the ingestion of

[1] For a useful overview, see Elsey, 2017, pp. 1–11.
[2] Nutt, King and Phillips, 2010, pp. 1558–1565.
[3] Pollan, 2015.
[4] Flanagan and Graham, 2017,. pp. 293–313.
[5] Hsiao, 2017, pp. 605–614.

psychedelic drugs, and I consider, for each of these, whether this type of alteration amounts to a distortion.

2. What Psychedelic States Can Be Like

The altered mental states produced by psychedelic drugs can vary significantly from one person to another and, depending on 'set and setting', can also vary significantly for a single person from one session to another. Nevertheless, certain alterations are very prevalent in the literature.

Albert Hofmann, the chemist who first synthesized LSD, described the visual and auditory alterations he experienced during his first intentionally induced LSD trip:

> Little by little I could begin to enjoy the unprecedented colours and plays of shapes that persisted behind my closed eyes. Kaleidoscopic, fantastic images surged in on me, alternating, variegated, opening and then closing themselves in circles and spirals, exploding in coloured fountains, rearranging and hybridizing themselves in constant flux. It was particularly remarkable how every acoustic perception, such as the sound of a door handle or a passing automobile, became transformed into optical perceptions. Every sound generated a vividly changing image, with its own consistent form and colour.[6]

The writer and philosopher Aldous Huxley wrote about his experiences with the psychedelic drug mescaline. Huxley reported that, contrary to what he had expected, he 'saw no landscapes, no enormous spaces, no magical growth and metamorphosis of buildings, nothing remotely like a drama or a parable'. Rather, he had a very simple experience: Looking at a small glass vase with three flowers, he wrote that he felt as if he were 'seeing what Adam had seen on the morning of his creation – the miracle, moment by moment, of naked existence' and that he took an experience of this kind to be 'what Catholic theologians call "a gratuitous grace".'[7]

In the case of emotional alterations, psychedelic experiences can be neutral, but they can also be on the extreme sides of the affective spectrum. Simone de Beauvoir reports that Jean-Paul Sartre (her husband) formed his influential concept of 'existential nausea' due to a very bad mescaline trip.[8]

Others report very positive experiences. Psychiatrist Sidney Cohen, a pioneering researcher of psychedelic substances, wrote about an experience with LSD: 'The entire experience seemed to charge with value and significance; the world and its occupants seemed enormously beautiful, delightful and harmonious and I was included within that general harmony.'[9] In the same direction, a cancer patient who received psilocybin in a recent trail at Johns Hopkins reported that she was:

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[6] Hofmann, 1980, Chap 1.

[7] Huxley, 1954, p. 73. For those interested in reading more firsthand reports of psychedelic experiences, I recommend Erowid, an online repository which includes thousands of trip reports. See https://erowid.org/ experiences/

[8] de Beauvoir, 1965, pp. 209–10.

[9] Cohen, 1970, pp. 102–3. Thanks to Chris Letheby for bringing this work to my attention.

> overcome with love and all the love that I have for my family and my friends. I felt that it was coming from them; also I felt that I was bathed in it. And if I were religious it definitely would have been a religious experience, I would have said bathed in God's love. And I don't think English really has a way to say this without using that word 'God', maybe bathed in transcendent love. Bathed in universal love. It was such a strong feeling.[10]

3. Assessing Four Types of Psychedelic Mind-Alteration

Some of the common attributes of psychedelic experiences mentioned in the quotations above include: (1) alterations in colour phenomenology, (2) the mixing of different sensory modalities, (3) a heightened sense of beauty, and (4) increased feelings of love and trust.

Are such alterations distortions?

3.1 Alterations in Colour Phenomenology

Imagine that you are looking at a leaf. It looks green, the way leaves usually do. Then you ingest a psychedelic drug, close your eyes, and wait an hour. When you open your eyes again, the leaf looks different. While it might still be recognizably green, it is now more intense, glowing, rich, and saturated. Would this be a distortion?

Admittedly, this could *lead to* a distortion. If, as a result of taking the drug, you came to believe that the surface of the leaf had changed – that it now reflected light at a different wavelength – you would be mistaken. Let us say, however, that you formed no such belief. Would your experience of the colour of the leaf nevertheless be distorted?

It seems that it would be a distortion given the premise that the colour of the leaf is intrinsic to the leaf, and that the way it looks to us humans under normal conditions is the one right way to see it the leaf. It is doubtful, however, that this is how colour perception works. Although our minds evolved to present light waves in the range of 495–570 nm as what we, phenomenally speaking, call *green*, it is not clear that phenomenal green is the only way this kind of light can be represented. It seems possible that a cat, an elephant, or a bat (or for that matter, another human) can have a different phenomenology of light waves in this part of the spectrum and, if they do, it does not follow that they are mistaken. They would merely, due to the nature and condition of their visual system, be representing light in this range differently, and there is presumably a range of phenomenologies of light in this spectrum that are all equally truthful in how they present the leaf.

Notice that if we accept this, we must accept that, at least in the case of colour phenomenology, there is some room for alteration without distortion. Although there is, presumably, a statistically normal way for humans to experience light in the 495–570 nm range, and it is true that a deviation from this could result in practical problems (e.g. reading traffic lights), it seems that we are not justified in holding that the way light reflected from the leaf looks to a human being under the influence of a psychedelic is less faithful to the real colour of the leaf than the way it looks to the average human being.

[10] Swift, Belser, Agin-Liebes, Devenot, Terrana, Friedman, Guss, Bossis and Ross, 2017, pp. 488–519.

If we humans had faced different reproductive pressures in our ancestral environments, what is now the phenomenology of light in the 495–570 nm range under the influence of a psychedelic drug could have been the norm. That would, presumably, not have been a distorted form of consciousness.

(If one thinks it would be distorted, imagine that in that alternatively evolved world, someone discovered a drug that, when ingested, it made colours look the way they do to us today. If one believes that colour is intrinsic, and that we are now uniquely right on how we see the world around us, it seems that one would be committed to believing that, in such a world, the use of drugs could give people privileged access to the true nature of things.)

3.2 The Mixing of Different Sensory Modalities

Imagine, next, that you are listening to a recording of one of Bach's organ concertos. It sounds nice, as it usually does. Then you ingest a psychedelic drug, stop the recording, and wait for an hour. When you restart the recording, the experience is different. While it is still recognizably Bach's concerto, the sound is now accompanied by cascading colours dancing around in the space around you (imagine something like an old screen-saver on a computer). Would this be a distortion?

Admittedly, this could also *lead to* a distortion. If you came to believe that colourful objects had entered the room, you would be distorted. But let us say that you formed no such belief. Would your experience of the music nevertheless be distorted?

It seems that it would be a distortion on the premise that the air vibrations that we call sounds are intrinsically auditory, and just auditory, so that to get visual impressions from them is to experience the vibrations differently from how they really are. Here again, however, it seems that other animals could experience the vibrations differently and that, if they did, it would not follow that they were mistaken. If we concede that, it seems we must concede, in the case of synesthesia as well as in the case of altered colour phenomenology, that there could be alteration without distortion.

3.3 Enhanced Beauty

Imagine that you are looking at three flowers on a table, as Aldous Huxley did. They look nice, as flowers usually do. Then, like Huxley, you ingest a psychedelic, close your eyes, and wait for an hour. When you open your eyes again, the flowers are stunningly beautiful. Would this be a distorted representation of the flowers?

This would be distorted if we take beauty to be an intrinsic property of the flowers. Perhaps the flowers are just four out of ten on the beauty scale and, under our normal mode of functioning, we are given truthful information about their beauty. When, under the influence of a psychedelic, we think they score nine out of ten for beauty, we are mistaken. But this, presumably, is not how beauty works. Although there might be an objective fact about how beautiful a particular flower looks to a particular subject under particular conditions, there is presumably no objective fact about how beautiful a flower must look to any non-distorted subject. So here again it seems that we can have alteration without distortion.

3.4 Enhanced Love and Trust

Finally, imagine that, as a result of ingesting a psychedelic drug, you felt significantly elevated levels of love and trust. Would your feelings then be distorted? Admittedly, these feelings might be distorted if, due to the influence of the drug, you believed that those around you had stronger feelings towards you than they really had, or perhaps that they felt exactly what you were feeling. That, however, would be a conclusion that you might, or might not, draw, depending on how the drug affected your power of judgment more generally. Would, however, the significant elevation of feeling love and trust be a distortion?

While such a level of love and trust could bring one out of tune with customary ways of interacting, insofar as these have developed to organize the interaction of individuals with lower levels of love and trust, it seems that the normal human level (or range) of love and trust is contingent: It is shaped, by the levels of love and trust that were most adaptive in the lives of our ancestors. Had factors in ancestral environments been different in relevant ways, the evolved levels of love and trust in today's humans might have been different than they currently are. Presumably, however, humans in that possible world would not have been systematically distorted.

4. A Thick and Curved Lens

My aim in considering the above examples is to illustrate that, at least in the case of some mental states, there can be alteration without distortion. In order to be justified in holding that alteration is sufficient for distortion, it seems that one must hold a naïve realist view of human cognition, according to which we perceive the objects around us just the way it is, in itself, and that any divergence from our perception is thereby a distorted perception of reality.[11]

A useful illustration might be to say that, on the naïve realist view, we see the world, under normal conditions, as if through a thin, straight glass. This glass adds nothing, subtracts nothing, skews nothing; it shows us the world just as it is on the outside.

Given this picture of the mind, if we start doing things with the glass – stretch it, push it, twist it – the result will always be that we are placing ourselves in an inferior epistemic situation: To alter is then to distort. Consequently, if this is one's picture of the human mind, it should be expected that one takes any alteration to the mind to imply distortion. Given what the last century of psychological research has taught us about the human mind and its many biases, however, it is evident that the human mind is not at all like a thin and straight glass; rather, it is like a thick and curved glass (think of a fun-house mirror). If we concede this, however, we cannot be justified in holding that alteration implies distortion.

5. Psychedelic Knowledge

If we accept the conclusion of the previous section, a further question might be asked: Might alterations to the lens also be cognitively beneficial?

This seems to be at least a *possibility*. Sticking to the metaphor, if you looked at a landscape through a thick, curved glass, it seems that you would be able to learn more about that landscape if you could make alterations to the glass. While making alterations to the glass could lead to more

[11] For more on naïve realism, see McDowell, 1994; see Brewer, 2011, on perception and its objects.

distortion, it could also help you see, for example, that two things that you thought were wide apart are, in fact, close to each other, or to discover something that you had previously overlooked. This, moreover, is not something that just works in the metaphor; it is uncontroversial that much of what we have learned from science has been learned by manipulating the lenses of microscopes and telescopes.

So, can users also gain new knowledge from the use of psychedelics? To provide a comprehensive answer to this question would require an in-depth discussion beyond what I can do in this chapter. I would like to point out, however, that this suggestion could help explain an otherwise puzzling finding in research into psychedelic therapy. As many readers will know, psychedelic drugs have, over the last decade, shown promising results as an aid in, for example, the treatment of addiction and obsessive-compulsive disorder, as well as in relieving anxiety and depression in terminally ill patients.[12] A noteworthy finding, however, is that, in contrast to other psychopharmacological interventions, one-time exposure can occasion change that lasts for months or even years. What could explain this?

In light of the discussion in this chapter, it seems that one explanation is that, by being exposed to a psychedelic drug, the patients come to gain new knowledge –about themselves, about the world around them, and/or about the value-significance of their actions and priorities. If a significant part of the benefit of the therapy comes from the gaining of new knowledge, this could explain why one-time exposure seemingly is enough to have a lasting effect. In the case of knowledge gains, it is very common for one-time exposure to have a lasting effect. If you learn something new, especially something that you take to be highly important, a one-time exposure will often be enough for that item of knowledge to be with you for the rest of your life.

The view that there are cognitive benefits to the use of psychedelics might seem like a radical proposal. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the view that there are cognitive benefits to using psychedelics is not the view that psychedelic states are overall cognitively superior to non-psychedelic states. Most likely, we would be cognitively much worse off if we were continually in psychedelic states. The claim, though, is not that psychedelic states are cognitively superior, but rather, that in a range of cases, the experience of psychedelic mental states *in addition* to normal mental states would be cognitively superior to having always only normal mental states. That, moreover, is a moderate claim, not a radical one.

6. Conclusion

In this chapter I have considered the objection that psychedelic drugs are distorting, that they work by cutting users off from reality, by making them see things that are not real, and by making them believing things that are false.

Although it is difficult to estimate the extent to which this is a prevalent and influential objection (that is a sociological question that lies beyond the scope of this chapter), I suspect that it accounts for more of the opposition to psychedelics than has hitherto been acknowledged in the literature. Irrespective of how influential or common it is, it is an important and interesting objection that is worth considering in the philosophy of psychedelics.

I have argued that the distortion objection is forceful only if one adopts an overly simplistic view of the human mind: The naïve realist view according to which we perceive the world

[12] Scott and Carhart-Harris, 2019, pp. 1–8.

around us just the way it inherently is, that any divergence from how our perception is, is hence distorted. Once this presumption is rejected, one must acknowledge that there can be alteration without distortion. Building on this, I further argued that there are reasons to believe that there are cognitive benefits associated with the use of psychedelics and that this, in turn, can have the power to explain how, in psychedelic theory, one-time exposure seems to be able to cause long-lasting effects.

Let me end by pointing briefly to two practical implications of what I have argued – one for research and one for broader societal discussions about psychedelics. On the research side, the view that I have defended gives rise to an empirically testable hypothesis, namely that to hold a naïve realist view of the human mind should predict being dismissive of psychedelics. It would be interesting to explore whether researchers who work empirically on attitudes towards psychedelics would test this prediction.

On the societal side, one implication of what I have argued is that, in discussions about psychedelics, we might be well advised to pay more attention to the often-implicit assumptions about the human mind that are brought into the discussion. If these are at the root of many disagreements, addressing assumptions about the human mind head on-might be what is needed in order to move the discussion about psychedelics forward.

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