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Philosophy’s Contribution to Psychedelic Research and Therapy

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Between June and August 2021, we published a series of blog posts about the MIND Foundation’s INSIGHT conference. The blog posts describe the defining ideas that drive this biennial meeting in Berlin. The second edition of INSIGHT took place on Sept 9–12 at the Langenbeck-Virchow Haus in Berlin. It was also be live-streamed into the world. This fourth post highlights philosophical contributions to psychedelic research and their role at the INSIGHT conference.

In this short blogpost, we want to highlight

- how philosophy (especially epistemology, metaphysics, phenomenology, and ethics) can contribute to psychedelic research in general, and
- how this is reflected and expressed at INSIGHT 2021.

It is not the aim nor is it possible to provide in-depth answers to the big philosophical questions in psychedelic research in this post. Instead, the reader is invited to take a curious and inquisitive approach to the interplay between philosophy & psychedelic research.

What are psychedelic experiences?

In order to do high-quality empirical research on psychedelic experiences, we need a good definition of what a psychedelic experience is in the first place. Now, many psychedelic experiences are easy to recognize when they occur, but it remains true that there can be borderline cases, and cases lacking certain aspects of paradigmatic cases that are therefore harder to recognize. For example, an experience might lack the

seemingly characteristic visual aspects of a psychedelic 'trip', or be induced via an activity like meditation or immersive breathwork. Should such experiences be counted as *psychedelic*, and why or why not?

Defining 'psychedelic experiences' in either vague or overgeneralized terms, such as 'altered' or 'non-ordinary states' is not enough of a clear definition. Neither it is sufficient to only explain the word 'psychedelic' etymologically.

Getting clearer on what psychedelic experiences are involves clear and rigorous conceptualization:

- What are key aspects of psychedelic experiences?
- How can they be defined?
- How can they be distinguished and categorized?

Here is one of the access doors for philosophy to psychedelic science. Without a clear definition, further experiments and studies would likely not yield data that is very meaningful. For example, we need to be able to decompose psychedelic experiences into their various aspects to identify which aspects, if any, explain the observed therapeutic benefits of ingesting psychedelic substances.

Furthermore, in contrast to measuring objects in the outside world, such as climate change, psychedelic research seeks to explore psychological processes. And these psychological processes, as many philosophers and cognitive scientists agree upon, also contains a subjective dimension.1,2

For decades, there has been a debate in philosophy, psychology, and lately also in neuroscience, about whether or not consciousness can be understood without including this so-called first-person perspective. Some phenomenologists argue that for psychedelic experiences in particular, the subjective, first-person perspective is an important part to understand the whole picture.

Originally defined by philosopher Edmund Husserl in 1905, phenomenology in general can be described as "the study of 'phenomena': appearances of things, or things as they appear in our experience, or the ways we experience things, thus the meanings things have in our experience".3

Appreciating this first-person approach, there is a growing body of qualitative studies in psychedelic research, that want to gather data about what psychedelic experiences *mean* to humans, how they *feel* during an experience and after, how their *sense of being in the world* changes through them, and much more.4

Doing this research involves language. Language implies to engage with cognitive conceptualizations of the phenomenon. The concepts that come out of this work can then be used in quantitative research, e.g. for building better questionnaires.

Are psychedelic experiences hallucinations?

Another way that philosophers contribute to psychedelic research is through questioning the epistemic value of psychedelic experiences. In more simple words: Do people that undergo a psychedelic experience gain *knowledge* about themselves or the world, or are they simply hallucinating?

This question is particularly relevant because one of the aspects that seems to constitute a psychedelic experience is its *noetic quality,* which is the feeling of unmediated insight into reality, especially into oneself.5 These experiences are often described by those who have them as more meaningful and more real than everyday reality. But is this feeling accurate after all? Philosophers such as Dr. Chris Letheby, who will also present at INSIGHT 2021, want to find out.

Letheby offers an elegant approach to this question by suggesting that psychedelic experiences should have the status of being *epistemically innocent*.6 By this he means that, even if psychedelic experiences are non-veridical in their content (i.e., they are not an accurate depiction of reality), they can nevertheless offer epistemic value. They can do so indirectly by resulting in an increased connectedness as well as a stronger motivation to engage with the world, which can foster inquiry and critical thought; and they can do so more directly by revealing the contingency of our sense of self7 and sense of time's passing.8
This is to show that psychedelic experiences can help people to develop a new relationship to themselves, as well as to others and to the world as a whole. If used in safe and legal settings, psychedelics experiences may offer potential for therapy and human development. This is a good starting point to argue against the commonly held idea that psychedelics merely give rise to hallucinations.

However, as it is often the case in philosophy, this yields new questions. Are positive therapeutic outcomes somehow related to whether patients had non-veridical or veridical experiences?
And is it ethical to use psychedelics in psychiatry and psychotherapy if it cannot be fully determined whether subjects experience 'false realities' after all?

What is an ethics of consciousness?

This brings us to another discipline of philosophy: ethics. After all, what is beneficial or good for individuals and societies cannot be determined solely through empirical investigation, but requires a normative dimension.

Plainly and provocatively put: Not even all the data from psychology, neurosciences and other cognitive sciences tell us anything about *what a good life is.* Even if cognitive science eventually produces a complete picture of how the brain and mind work – including, for example, what causes stress, frustration, contentment, or thrills – it must be supplemented with normative judgments about which such states we *should* pursue, and at what cost.

As Prof. Thomas Metzinger points out, we are urged to not only determine what a good life is, but also *what a good state of consciousness is*.9 This is of course not to deny the value of asking what a good life is. In fact, these questions are connected in the sense that many good states of consciousness may ultimately result in a good life.

Brought about by technologization, there is a growing number of tools – psychoactive substances, virtual reality, AI, and more – that can induce altered states in human consciousness. But which states should we want to bring about, and by what means?

The endeavour to establish an ethics of consciousness requires the humility to know that it is difficult to find absolute answers. Instead, questions like the following can and should be discussed on a collective, as well as explored on an individual level:

- What makes a state of consciousness a valuable one?
- How can we learn to cultivate valuable states of consciousness?
- Who is to determine which states are valuable and which are not?
- What skills, norms, and practices are required, if a society wants to establish an ethics of consciousness?

INSIGHT 2021 provides the space, tools, and expertise that is necessary to best facilitate questions like these, as well as many others that could only be touched on in this blogpost. The time to continue is in September, when many curious, passionate, and critical-thinking people will come together to share, debate, experience, and hopefully, also enjoy.

If you missed INSIGHT 2021 or are still interested in the presentations, you can access the recorded content from the INSIGHT conference here if you have an active MIND Membership.

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