PSYCHEDELIC EXPERIENCE

REVEALING THE MIND

AIDAN LYON
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AIDAN LYON
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This book was born out of several psychedelic experiences I had in Amsterdam starting around 2014. There were four in particular that influenced its development.

The first experience kick-started the general philosophical project and, in a way, was the culmination of my initial series of experiences. Like so many people, I was deeply transformed by my psychedelic experiences. I found that they were helping me be more creative and insightful and generally live a better, healthier life. It was clear that these experiences were incredibly valuable. However, they were also curiously variegated in their qualities—each experience was so unlike all the others. At some point, I had the experience that launched this project: I realized that this variability posed a philosophical puzzle. While these experiences were extraordinarily different from one another, it was also clear they were unified in some important way. And so I started wondering what these experiences have in common and what sets them apart from other kinds of experience. In short, I realized there was an important philosophical question lying hidden in plain sight: what are psychedelic experiences? It seemed to me that it would be tremendously useful to have some kind of conceptual framework, even a rough one, for understanding these experiences from a subjective perspective. So, I started thinking about the question of what psychedelic experiences are, what they have in common, and how they relate to one another.

The second experience gave rise to an insight that set several major pieces of the puzzle in place and determined the general structure of the book. This insight was that whatever psychedelic experiences are, they constitute a category of experience that is much broader than how they are typically conceived. It is commonly thought that a psychedelic experience is an experience one has after consuming a psychedelic substance. (For example, the current Wikipedia page on ‘psychedelic experience’ defines the concept along these lines.) However, such an understanding ties the experience too tightly to its cause. You don’t need to take a psychedelic to have a psychedelic experience. There are other ways. Indeed, part of the insight was that meditation (which I had been practising for a while) is another way of having a psychedelic experience. Thus, it became clear to me that our understanding of psychedelic experiences should be conceptually independent from psychedelic substances. This second experience also involved the realization that my most profound experiences were often attained by combining meditation and psychedelics. So, not only are there different ways of having psychedelic experiences, they can also be combined, with powerfully synergistic effects.
The third experience was a natural outcome of the second and my explorations with meditation and psychedelics (although I wasn’t aware of this at the time). This experience made it clear that there are psychedelic experiences that are **radically** unlike the others—so much so that they seem to be yet another category of experience. In the literature, these experiences have come to be known as **mystical experiences**. While it can be difficult to describe psychedelic experiences, mystical experiences are a whole other ballgame. They are deeply **ineffable** and, as William James famously observed, they also have a **noetic** quality to them. Despite their ineffability, mystical experiences have been described as revelations of ultimate reality, glimpses of enlightenment, unions with the divine, and so on. Where “regular” psychedelic experiences appeared to be understandable within a naturalistic worldview, those that are mystical reveal that there is an entirely different way of looking at the world that should not be ignored. This inspired me to approach the topic with greater humility and opened up a new world of philosophical wonder—one in which naturalism and mysticism can be integrated as equals.

The fourth experience inverted my philosophical project. Up until that point, I was focused on using philosophy to make sense of psychedelic experiences. In this fourth experience, I had the insight that psychedelic experiences are themselves philosophical. It’s difficult to describe what this means, exactly. Part of this insight was personal in nature: whatever it was that had originally drawn me to philosophy, as an academic, was the same thing drawing me into these experiences. However, it also seemed that this aspect of the experiences wasn’t merely reflective of my own predispositions. As is well known, there is a plausible case to be made that many of the world’s philosophical traditions find their origins in psychedelic experiences, whether they were induced with the help of substances such as **kykeon** in the Eleusinian Mysteries of ancient Greece, or **soma** of the **Rig Veda**, or the yogic and meditative practices of Hinduism and Buddhism. In short, it appears that these experiences can help us cultivate **wisdom**. They can help us become wiser in the sense of being better decision-makers and they can also help us pursue a deeper form of wisdom. This, I think, is the wisdom that Socrates and Plato were in love with, the wisdom of the Buddha’s Noble Eightfold Path, the wisdom of the Dao, the wisdom of Suhrawardi’s Illuminationism, and so on. Thus, I became fascinated with the idea that psychedelic experiences can help us do philosophy—in the sense of loving and pursuing wisdom.

Of course, there is nothing new under the sun: others before me have had similar experiences, insights, and thoughts, so I only mention them to help explain how this book came about. I was compelled to write it because I needed to reconcile all of these profound experiences, and their unusual forms of knowledge and wisdom, with the rest of my belief system. My background is primarily analytic
and scientific: I grew up in an atheistic household and hold a Bachelors degree in mathematics and a PhD in analytic philosophy on the foundations of probability theory in statistical physics and mathematical biology. Because of my background and interests, I couldn’t find anything written about psychedelic experiences that satisfied my philosophical curiosity. The scientific literature was helpful but often too focused on specific empirical details, and there was almost nothing in analytic philosophy (although that is now changing rapidly). And while there was plenty of important work on, and within, the mystical traditions, it tended to downplay, or just not even mention, psychedelics. I also found that many of the books about psychedelics were either lacking in rigour or didn’t dive into the philosophical questions that I found to be important and was passionate about. So, I set out to write a book that I wish had existed when I first began having these experiences—something straightforward while still reasonably precise, and something philosophical but with a healthy respect for both naturalism and mysticism. As such, I think the book will be of value to others who are encountering these experiences for the first time (or are curious about them) or who share a similar background and mindset.

Given the importance and timeliness of the topic, I’ve also tried to make the book accessible to a wide audience. You don’t need to be a philosopher or a scientist or a mystic to read it, but you may need to look a few things up here and there. Readers who are immersed in the field of psychedelic research may find that the book sometimes approaches things in a counterintuitive way—particularly my understanding of psychedelic experience as a kind of experience that can be had without consuming a psychedelic. However, based on feedback I’ve received, such readers tend to find that this counterintuitiveness eventually fades and, as one lets go of the tight association between psychedelic experiences and psychedelic substances, a more experiential and a priori perspective emerges that many find helpful. Other readers who are more immersed in the mystical traditions (or wisdom traditions, if you prefer) tend to have a different reaction. They find this perspective familiar and appealing but also that the book can sometimes emphasize the mind at the expense of the body, heart, and soul. This choice of emphasis mostly reflects one of the underlying goals of the book: to help show how an analytic and scientific mindset can accommodate a mystical one without compromising the scruples of either way of looking at the world. With that said, the emphasis is also somewhat illusory. ‘Mind’ can be understood here as broadly synonymous with psyché—historically interpreted as ‘mind’, ‘soul’, ‘self’, ‘spirit’, ‘breath’, etc.—and to include such things as somatic awareness, heartfulness, subtle energy, and so on. Thus, various somatic and energetic experiences—for example, those associated with qīgōng, āsana, prānāyāma, and kundalini practices—can be understood as psychedelic (e.g. as spirit-revealing or as revealing of subtle energy).
There is one final aspect of the book that deserves prefatory comment, which is its overall positive and optimistic tone. This tone doesn't reflect a belief that psychedelics and meditation are panaceas or that the spiritual/self-development path is a smooth one (far from it!). In general, all interventions on the body and mind come with risks, and the consumption of psychedelics and the practice of meditation are no exception. Indeed, since risk and reward tend to go hand-in-hand, one may argue that these particular interventions can be especially risky. While there is something to that perspective, it also seems reasonably clear from the research literature that we can mitigate and manage those risks. That doesn't mean that psychedelics and meditation are for everyone, but it does mean that their risk-reward profiles can be suitable for certain kinds of people in the right sorts of circumstances. Thus, the positive and optimistic tone of the book reflects this assessment, along with a belief that a better philosophical understanding of psychedelic experiences can help us further refine the risk-reward profiles of these interventions. Indeed, this is one of my central motivations for writing the book: that we can benefit from a more philosophically precise understanding of these experiences.

I am indebted to many friends and colleagues who have helped and supported me through the process of researching and writing this book. First and foremost, I am extremely grateful to Anya Farennikova. Her insightfulness, creativity, critical feedback, and our many lengthy discussions about all things psychedelic and mystical, have made this book infinitely better than it would have been had I been left to my own devices. I’d also like to thank Joost Breeksema, Michiel van Elk, Branden Fitelson, Logan Fletcher, Alan Hájek, Ruben Laukkonen, Michael Morreau, Martijn Schirp, Ted Shear, Ida Stuij, and Karim Thebault for especially helpful feedback, discussions, and encouragement.

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Introduction

Know thyself
—Delphic maxim

1.1 Psychedelic Philosophy

This book is about the philosophy of a special kind of experience known as psychedelic experience. The term ‘psychedelic’ derives from the ancient Greek words psychē (mind/soul) and dēlos (revealed/manifest) and means mind-revealing. Accordingly, a psychedelic experience is a mind-revealing experience. It is an experience in which hidden parts or aspects of your mind are revealed and become manifest in your consciousness.

The concept of psychedelic experience is a profoundly important one, but it is also widely misunderstood. The main cause of this is the concept’s historical connection with psychedelic drugs and the cultural baggage that comes along with them. Because of this connection, the term ‘psychedelic’ has become synonymous with “weird”, “druggy”, “mind-bending”, “crazy”, and so on. Understanding the term in this way is a mistake, but it is not just a mistake about the meaning of a word. This mistake obscures the true value of psychedelic experiences, and it prevents us from thinking clearly about them. This book aims to correct for this error.

Even when the error is corrected for, it is still easy to misunderstand the concept of psychedelic experience. This is because of how we relate to our minds. For example, some people seem to think that they have full access to their own minds, and so there is nothing about them to be revealed. One way to have this opinion is to think that all there is to the mind is just the conscious mind. This is a view that is often attributed to Descartes:

As to the fact that there can be nothing in the mind, in so far as it is a thinking thing, of which it is not aware, this seems to me to be self-evident. For there is nothing that we can understand to be in the mind, regarding this way, that is not

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1 The notion of mind will be understood broadly in this book so as to potentially include the soul, if such a thing exists, as well as other connotations or translations of psychē such as ‘spirit’ and ‘self’.
a thought or dependent on a thought. If it were not a thought or dependent on a thought it would not belong to the mind *qua* thinking thing; and we cannot have any thought of which we are not aware at the very moment it is in us.

Descartes 1641

From the perspective of this view, the idea of a mind-revealing experience can seem nonsensical: the mind is always fully present, and so it has no parts to be revealed. That’s quite a strong view about the mind, and most people probably don’t hold it. A view that is more reasonable, and which appears to be somewhat popular, is that there are, in fact, parts of our minds that exist outside of our awareness, but they are nonetheless accessible and can be made conscious at will. For example, right now you may not be consciously experiencing your love for chocolate, or your anxiety about finances, or your memory of eating breakfast today, but you can bring any of these into your awareness. From the perspective of this view, parts of the mind like these exist outside of awareness, but they are not hidden from awareness. And so the idea of a mind-revealing experience can still seem nonsensical: there is nothing inside our minds that is genuinely hidden.

Modern cognitive science shows that both of these views are false: it has given us overwhelming evidence that there are parts of our minds that are hidden from our awareness. For example, many of us have social biases that we are unaware of (Greenwald and Banaji 1995), we learn things implicitly without knowing we are doing so (Reber 1989), and there are factors that influence our decisions without us ever being conscious of them (Nisbett and Wilson 1977). One doesn’t need cognitive science, though, to know that parts of our minds can be hidden from awareness. Anyone who has struggled on an exam is familiar with the fact that it can be frustratingly difficult to call up knowledge—that we *know* we have—into awareness. Similarly, anyone who has had a tip-of-the-tongue experience—where you can’t remember a particular word, but you can *feel* that it’s there, just beyond the reach of your awareness—is also familiar with this fact. And psychotherapists around the world witness this phenomenon on a daily basis: we are remarkably oblivious to the emotions, beliefs, desires, and mental habits that drive so much of our behaviour and decision-making. It can take a lot of work—sometimes years of therapy—to uncover those things.

So, there are definitely parts of the mind that are hidden from our awareness. However, some psychologists suggest that these parts are so hidden that we can *never* see them. For example:

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\(^2\) Cottingham 1985, p. 171. It should be noted that although this is a view often attributed to Descartes, it is not clear that it is exactly what he believed. For example, in *The Passions of the Soul*, Descartes remarks that a forgotten childhood experience can affect a person as an adult. See Simmons 2012 for a discussion of some of the possible nuances of Descartes’ view of consciousness and the mind.
To understand better our own non-conscious personality dispositions, we cannot simply remove the veil obscuring our view, for there is no direct view. Instead, we are forced to make educated guesses about our non-conscious dispositions.

Wilson 2002, p. 90

According to this kind of view, there are chunks of our minds that we are forever locked out from accessing directly—much like how we are locked out from directly accessing each other’s minds. So, the only way to come to know these aspects of ourselves is to do what we do when we try to understand someone else’s mind: we have to observe our own behaviour, listen to what we tend to say, learn facts about human psychology, collect witness testimonies, and then draw inferences as to what is most likely going on in our hidden minds—as if we are strangers to ourselves.

A core thesis of this book is that in addition to these inferences, we can come to know our hidden minds through psychedelic experiences. That means there are parts of our minds that are not only outside of our awareness (contra Descartes) but also hidden from our awareness (contra popular opinion) and they can be revealed in conscious experience (contra Wilson). To put the point more vividly: I’ll argue that we can have a kind of x-ray vision into our hidden minds, so that when one is having that x-ray vision, one is having a psychedelic experience.

The big question, then, is: how can we get this x-ray vision? Clearly, we don’t always have it and yet many of us could greatly benefit from it, especially those who are struggling through years of expensive psychotherapy. Of course, this question about how we can get x-ray vision is really the question of how we can have a psychedelic experience. The answer that naturally suggests itself is that we can have a psychedelic experience by consuming a psychedelic substance. After all, that’s why these substances are called ‘psychedelics’: they are thought to produce mind-revealing experiences. Although this is widely believed, it is nevertheless an empirical hypothesis that could easily be false—or perhaps not true in the way some people might expect. And so the hypothesis that psychedelics produce psychedelic experiences deserves careful examination. In the coming chapters, I’ll evaluate the scientific evidence for this hypothesis. I’ll also argue that such drug-induced experiences can be lacking in an important respect. In terms of our x-ray vision metaphor, these experiences are often not as clear as they could be and, therefore, can be misleading.

Naturally, that raises another big question: are there other ways of having psychedelic experiences? And are there ways to have psychedelic experiences that are clearer and less misleading than the drug-induced ones? I’ll argue that there are. In particular, I will argue that the practice of meditation tends to induce psychedelic experiences that can complement the drug-induced ones.3

3 As we will see, there are different meditative practices, which have measurably different effects on the mind, and they contribute to psychedelic experiences in different ways.
Although the acts of consuming a psychedelic and practising meditation can look quite different, many have noticed that they also have some strong similarities in their effects (e.g. Badiner et al. 2015, Millière et al. 2018). A general thesis of the book is that psychedelic experiences induced by psychedelic drugs tend to be fast, messy, and temporary, while those induced by meditation tend to be more gradual, less messy, and more enduring. However, it doesn't follow from this that meditation-induced psychedelic experiences give us perfect x-ray vision. Nor does it follow that practising meditation is uniformly superior to consuming psychedelics. Both methods have their advantages and disadvantages and both are valuable tools to have available in one's self-knowledge toolkit.

A third way of having a psychedelic experience that I haven't yet mentioned is to do nothing. That is, you can have a psychedelic experience during your normal, everyday life (at the office, say), without doing anything unusual like meditating or consuming strange substances. I call such experiences spontaneous psychedelic experiences. We are all familiar with them, even though we may not be familiar with them as such. For example, take a typical case of the tip-of-the-tongue phenomenon. An interesting feature of such cases is that the desired word often comes to you after you have stopped reaching for it. That's a spontaneous psychedelic experience: the word was hidden, and then it is suddenly revealed to you—without you doing anything weird. There are many other kinds of spontaneous psychedelic experiences, including epiphanies, creative insights, overcoming writer's block, when we laugh at some jokes, when we first have the insight of our own mortality—and when we become aware of it again in later years. There are many more examples. What they all have in common is that a previously hidden part or aspect of the mind suddenly appears in one's conscious experience.

The idea that we can have spontaneous psychedelic experiences will be counterintuitive to some readers. You could even frame this reaction in terms of an objection: if it is correct that we can have spontaneous psychedelic experiences, then why are psychedelic drugs such a big deal? Why do people report having such profound and life-changing experiences from them? My reply is that psychedelic drugs are a big deal because they tend to induce experiences that are extremely psychedelic and far more psychedelic than our spontaneous psychedelic experiences tend to be. In other words, the difference is a difference in degree, not a difference in kind. To be sure, the difference in degree is substantial—like the wealth difference between billionaires and regular people—but it is still just a difference in degree.

This reply requires a conceptualization of psychedelic experience that allows for experiences to vary in the degree to which they are psychedelic. It may be tempting to understand this idea in terms of experiences varying in how weird or mind-bending they are, but if we stick to our understanding of ‘psychedelic’ in terms of mind-revelation, then it must mean that experiences can vary in how mind-revealing they are. But what does that mean? What makes one experience more
revealing of the mind than another? One of the objectives of this book is to answer this question and to unpack the idea of psychedelic experiences coming in degrees.

When we dig into that idea, it becomes clear that experiences can be more or less psychedelic in different ways. In other words, we’ll see that psychedelic experiences are multidimensional with respect to how they may reveal the mind. There are different dimensions along which psychedelic experiences can vary, and the position of a psychedelic experience with respect to these dimensions determines the overall character and strength of the experience. I call the space entailed by these dimensions psychedelic space. As we will see, the conceptual framework of psychedelic space is extremely helpful for thinking clearly about the concept of psychedelic experience. For instance, it will help us analyse the similarities and differences that exist between the psychedelic experiences induced by psychedelics and those that are induced by meditation. And it will help us understand the phenomenon of psychedelic experience in general, no matter how it is brought about.

So far, we have been focusing on the ways one can have a psychedelic experience. However, we should also consider if, and how, one can have the opposite kind of experience. Such an experience would be one in which the mind is concealed rather than revealed. I will call such experiences psychecryptic experiences—derived from psychē (mind/soul) and kryptos (concealed/hidden). As in the case of psychedelic experiences, we regularly have psychecryptic experiences but often don’t recognize them as such. A common example of such an experience is getting angry, which explains why one should avoid making decisions in such a state: you have temporarily lost access to the better parts of yourself. Another example is when a clever salesperson lures you into buying something you don’t want: they know how to manipulate you so that you become disconnected from the parts of your mind that would prevent you from making the unwanted purchase. Various dissociative states—such as amnesia, fugues, derealization, and depersonalization—are also often psychecryptic in nature. Certain substances, such as alcohol and sedatives, may also have a tendency to cause psychecryptic experiences. Although we never use the terms ‘psychecryptic’ or ‘mind-concealing’ to describe these sorts of mental states, it’s clear that we can recognize them as such. In some cases, we even label them in a way that reflects this idea. Take, for example, the experience of brain fog, which we all endure from time to time. We use the term ‘fog’ to indicate that we can’t think clearly and that it’s more difficult to see and move around in our minds the way we normally do—for example, by recalling memories in sufficient detail. Such an experience is clearly psychecryptic, and there are many more examples of psychecryptic experiences that we could find. Once you see a few of them, you start to see them everywhere—just like psychedelic experiences.

Although they are opposites, it is possible to have psychedelic and psychecryptic experiences at the same time. The metaphor of using a flashlight to find something in a dark and cluttered closet can help illustrate this idea. Turning on
the flashlight is a psychedelic experience, making it brighter makes the experience more psychedelic, turning it off is psychecryptic, and moving it around is simultaneously psychedelic and psychecryptic: as you clamber through the closet, some parts of it are revealed and other parts are concealed (falling back into the darkness). In other words, in some of our experiences, some parts of the mind can be revealed while other parts are simultaneously concealed. Such experiences are both psychedelic and psychecryptic. Again, we're also familiar with these experiences, but we just may not be familiar with them as such. For example, part of the reason we tend to be bad at multitasking is because most tasks usually induce experiences that are both psychedelic and psychecryptic. As you pay attention to one thing, and thus bring it into awareness and hold it there, it becomes more difficult to pay attention to other things, and they consequently tend to fade from awareness and become hidden from it.⁴

This connection with attention is of fundamental importance in understanding how psychedelics and meditation can induce psychedelic experiences. The attentional system involves the allocation of attentional resources so as to bring things in and out of our awareness. There are two important facts to know about this resource: (i) it is limited, and (ii) we often don't use it as efficiently as we could. These two facts roughly correspond to the two ways that psychedelics and meditation can change our awareness, so that our experience becomes more psychedelic: psychedelics temporarily increase the amount of resource that can be allocated throughout the mind, and meditation increases our ability to use it more efficiently.⁵ Although the primary effect on attention is different, the outcome can be the same: both psychedelics and meditation create an attentional surplus. This surplus of attentional resource can then be allocated to things in the mind that don't normally receive enough attention to appear in awareness.

The flashlight analogy is again useful here. The light of the flashlight is your attention, and what you can see is your awareness.⁶ Roughly speaking, the effect of a psychedelic is to temporarily increase the amount of light shining from the flashlight.⁷ Because of the increase in the amount of light, you can now see more of the closet than you otherwise would. However—continuing the analogy—most people are not very good at using a flashlight: it's difficult to hold it still or to move it

⁴ There is a subtle issue here that will eventually need to be addressed. Normally, we speak of being aware of something in the external world (a penguin, for example) as though we are aware of that thing and not of our mental representation of it (our visual image of the penguin). Moving our attention around, then, might be better said to be world-revealing/concealing rather than mind-revealing/concealing. In Chapter 5, I'll discuss this issue in more detail. The upshot will be that if the experiences we are concerned with are world-revealing, then they are world-revealing by way of being mind-revealing.

⁵ This is not to imply that these are the only effects of psychedelics and meditation.

⁶ To be clear, this is just a metaphor for attention that can be useful in some situations and should not be understood as a general theory of attention.

⁷ As we will see in Chapter 5, the truth is more complicated than this, but this metaphor is good enough for now.
around effectively and deliberately. Practising meditation develops your ability to use the flashlight more effectively. It also reduces the need for using the flashlight: you begin to be able to see things in the closet using less light.

It’s important to note that this is only an analogy and the full situation is more complex. For example, increasing the brightness of the flashlight won’t increase your ability to see in the closet if you shine the flashlight into your eyes or if you stumble around and create an even greater mess.

However, with that qualification kept in mind, the analogy is useful for getting a sense of how psychedelics and meditation can both reveal the mind in their different ways. They both bring more things into awareness by creating different attentional surpluses. This is the sense in which psychedelics and meditation are often said to “expand awareness” or “expand consciousness”. While these concepts might appear unscientific (or sound outlandish), I’ll argue that there is good evidence for them: by creating an attentional surplus, psychedelics and meditation can, in fact, expand awareness—and thus reveal the mind.

By now, I hope to have given a good sense of what this book is about. Given the title, you may have expected that it would primarily be about psychedelic substances. However, the book’s central focus concerns psychedelic experiences. To some readers, it may seem that I am changing the definition of ‘psychedelic experience’. However, as we’ll see in Chapter 2, it is actually the original definition, and a core thesis of the book is that it’s the best one for understanding the phenomenon of primary interest to many readers—that is, the experiences that are induced by psychedelics. Thus, the main goal of the book is to develop a precise philosophical and psychological understanding of psychedelic experiences, irrespective of how they are brought about.

Another goal of the book is to argue that appropriately engaging with psychedelic experiences can serve a higher purpose: that of cultivating wisdom. Seeking wisdom is the fundamental goal of philosophy (at least, historically speaking), and it is for achieving this goal that psychedelic experience finds its true philosophical significance. We’ll see that by the lights of the major conceptions of wisdom that have been put forward by philosophers, psychedelic experiences can be valuable tools for cultivating wisdom. For example, according to Socrates, wisdom involves being aware of the limits of one’s knowledge. Many of us fail to be wise in this respect, because we are often deeply unaware of our ignorance and because it can be inconvenient, and even painful, for us to acknowledge it. Indeed, what we do not know is often hidden from us by other things that we also cannot see. So, becoming wiser in this respect involves winning an internal struggle over that which obscures our ignorance. I will argue that psychedelic experiences

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8 The analogy also over-emphasizes the amplificatory aspect of attention. As is now well known, attention also has an inhibitory aspect to it.
can help us with that struggle and reveal the ignorance that lies hidden within our minds.

Being aware of one's ignorance is just one side to Socrates' conception of wisdom. The other side involves having knowledge about reality that is universal and timeless in nature. Arguably, this is the kind of knowledge that we associate with our best scientists, poets, writers, philosophers, musicians, spiritual leaders, artists, sages, mystics, and so on. Psychedelic experiences can help us become wise in this respect as well—for example, by helping us become more creative and insightful. In particular, psychedelic experiences can help us learn universal and timeless truths that may concern our minds (or souls). Many philosophers and mystics, for instance, have long thought that important philosophical and spiritual truths can be discovered through introspection, contemplation, and meditation. I won't take a stand on what those truths are, except that if those truths genuinely involve some hidden parts or aspects of the mind, then psychedelic experiences may help us come to know them.

Having knowledge of such truths and knowing the limits of one's knowledge are two important aspects of being wise. However, Aristotle thought that there must be more to wisdom than having these two kinds of knowledge. The essence of one of his arguments for this was that some philosophers of his time didn't appear wise in an important respect. What they lacked is what Aristotle called *phronesis*, which is commonly translated as 'practical wisdom'. To be wise in this practical sense is to know how to make good decisions—and to actually make them. I will argue that appropriately engaging with psychedelic experience can help us become wise in this sense as well.

At first glance, engaging with psychedelic experience might seem like the sort of thing that is antithetical to good decision-making. However, this impression is mostly because of the unfortunate connection between the concept of psychedelic experience and the world's turbulent history with psychedelic drugs. One way to begin to see through that cloud of confusion is to notice that we all recognize the opposite is true: we know that *psychecryptic* experiences tend to be bad for decision-making. Recall: you don't want to make decisions when angry or drunk or when struggling with brain fog. So, if concealing the mind tends to be bad for decision-making, wouldn't it follow that revealing the mind tends to be good for it? I'll argue that the answer is yes, provided that we make some qualifications. Roughly speaking, my argument will be that appropriately engaging with psychedelic experiences can help us become more aware of the undue influences on our decisions and, consequently, help us manage or even alter them for the betterment of our decision-making.⁹

⁹ To be clear, we should be mindful of the possibility that *psychedelic drugs* are not perfectly psychedelic. It might be that they are psychedelic in some respects, but psychecryptic in others, and so they may be both beneficial and harmful to decision-making.
Perhaps the ultimate notion of wisdom is that which is pointed to by the Delphic maxim, *know thyself.* Indeed, I think a case can be made that the Socratic and Aristotelian conceptions of wisdom are really just different aspects of—or perhaps threads that lead to—this ultimate form of wisdom. For example, knowing the limits of your knowledge must surely be part of knowing yourself. Similarly, knowing how to make good decisions must involve knowing what is good for oneself and being aware of one’s decision-making dispositions (two strata of self-knowledge). However, the ultimate form of wisdom to which the Delphic maxim points arguably absorbs and transcends these conceptions of wisdom, taking on a mystical form that is divine and ineffable.

We also find a similar notion of wisdom in non-Western schools of thought. For example, in one translation of the *Dao De Ching,* we find: ‘knowing others is intelligent; knowing yourself is enlightened’ (Addiss and Lombardo 1993). Similarly, according to many Buddhist schools of thought, enlightenment involves the realization of one’s true, and ineffable, self-nature.¹⁰

It would seem, therefore, that all roads of wisdom lead to—or through—the self. As we’ll see, psychedelic experiences are not only beneficial in the pursuit of this ultimate form of wisdom, engaging with them is, arguably, the *only* way to attain it.

### 1.2 Book Outline

Now that we have a general understanding of the overall mission of the book, let’s take a closer look at its structure. I’ll start with an outline of the book and then review the plan for each chapter.

In Chapters 2–4, I lay out a philosophical framework that can help us think clearly about psychedelic experiences. This framework is needed because thinking clearly about psychedelic experiences is not an easy thing to do. There are at least three main reasons why. The first is that the general topic is emotionally charged and potentially has huge social and political implications. Such topics often invite passionate and nonrigorous thinking (on both sides of whatever debate). The second reason is that the method of inducing a psychedelic experience that most people are familiar with—namely, by consuming a psychedelic drug—has such a profound and disruptive effect on the mind that thinking clearly about *anything* can be challenging, let alone the disruption itself. The third reason is that the concept of psychedelic experience is both old and new—familiar and unfamiliar—and that can cause a lot of confusion. We don’t yet really understand

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¹⁰ It should be noted, though, that it is a matter of debate as to what that true self-nature is, with many Buddhists believing that there is no self—a common interpretation of *anattā.* However, Buddhists are not universally agreed on this point. Some believe that *anattā* should not be treated as a metaphysical doctrine but instead engaged with as a practical method for discovering a hidden truth about the self (Albahari 2002).
these experiences, and the little bit of knowledge that we do have can fool us into thinking we know more than we actually do. For these reasons, we need to start slowly and carefully, and build up a philosophical framework—a conceptual architecture, if you like—that will help us avoid many obstacles down the road.

In Chapters 5–8, I will point this new philosophical machinery at the scientific literature, so that we can start to make sense of actual psychedelic experiences. I will focus primarily on three kinds of psychedelic experience: (i) those that occur spontaneously, (ii) those that are induced by the consumption of psychedelics, and (iii) those that are induced by meditation. By studying these three kinds of psychedelic experience, I believe we can get a good handle on the general phenomenon of psychedelic experience (abstracting away from how it is induced). One way to think about these four chapters is that they constitute an informal assessment of the likelihoods of various hypotheses that we may want to consider. For example, take the hypothesis that psychedelics tend to produce psychedelic experiences. How likely is that hypothesis given that we know that psychedelics produce hallucinations (which may seem like the opposite of the mind being revealed)? As another example, consider the hypothesis that meditation also induces psychedelic experiences. How likely is that hypothesis given that the experiences that typically result from psychedelics and meditation look so different? And so on. There are many other hypotheses and many other pieces of evidence that we can consider. As we’ll see, some of these hypotheses can only be articulated once we have the philosophical framework in place.

In Chapters 9–11, I will come back to issues that are more philosophical in nature. In particular, I will discuss how psychedelic experience relates to two philosophically substantial issues: (i) that of mystical experience and (ii) that of wisdom and enlightenment. Necessarily, these issues will be less grounded in the scientific literature. However, they will be analysed within the confines of the philosophical framework that will—if the previous four chapters are successful—have received indirect support from the empirical research. So, although the issues of these three chapters may seem unusual or perhaps unscientific, the plan is to discuss them in a manner that meets the usual standards of analytic philosophy and scientific inquiry. Indeed, one of the exciting aspects of the latest research into psychedelics and meditation is that we can begin to scientifically investigate these issues, which have long been thought to lie outside the domain of science.

With that overview of the book’s structure in place, let’s now look at the goals of the particular chapters.

In Chapter 2, I introduce the central question of the book: what is psychedelic experience? A core objective of this chapter is to argue that this question is best understood as a conceptual question rather than an empirical question about the effects of psychedelic drugs (as might be expected by some readers). Approaching our topic in this way allows us to cleanly separate the concept of psychedelic experience from the baggage that often comes with the topic of psychedelic drugs.
This, in turn, makes it easier for us to think about things like psychedelic drugs in a baggage-free way. For example, we can ask whether so-called psychedelic drugs are actually psychedelic. That is, do psychedelics actually produce mind-revealing experiences? Perhaps they don’t—perhaps they only produce mind-scrambling experiences. Or perhaps they do, but perhaps they only reveal the mind in particular ways. If so, then are there methods for revealing the mind in other ways? And so on. By establishing this clear separation of conceptual and empirical matters, it will be easier to address each appropriately and find answers to our questions.

In Chapter 3, having established the central question as a conceptual one, I will then develop an answer to it. We already have the hint of an answer: a psychedelic experience is a mind-revealing experience. That must mean that it is an experience in which the mind is revealed in some way. But in what way? As we will see, we need to be careful here. If we are not, then all sorts of experiences will count as being psychedelic—for example, when you discover facts about your mind by reading a psychology textbook. As we dig into this issue, we’ll see that it is essential to stipulate that psychedelic experiences come in degrees. That is, experiences can be more or less psychedelic than other experiences. This raises the question of what it means for one experience to be more (or less) psychedelic than another experience. My answer is that an experience is more psychedelic than another if it is more revealing of the mind. And, as we’ll see, there are four main ways an experience can be more revealing of the mind: (i) scope: it can uncover larger parts of the mind; (ii) clarity: it can uncover parts of the mind more clearly; (iii) novelty: it can uncover more novel (or more deeply hidden) parts of the mind; and (iv) duration: it can uncover parts of the mind for longer periods of time. These four ways of being more mind-revealing constitute the four dimensions of what I call psychedelic space. All possible psychedelic experiences have a location within this conceptual space, and the overall phenomenological character of a psychedelic experience is determined by its position with respect to these four dimensions. In general, the further out along these dimensions an experience is, the more psychedelic it is.

In Chapter 4, I use the conceptual framework of psychedelic space to begin developing some empirical hypotheses about psychedelic experience that we may want to consider. This is necessary because it will help us avoid many pitfalls later on. For example, a common objection to the hypothesis that psychedelics produce psychedelic experiences is that many of the hallucinatory experiences that psychedelics are known to cause seem to be anything but mind-revealing. The point that psychedelic experiences can vary in terms of their clarity is important.

11 Although it often isn’t clear in the scientific literature, it is a hypothesis (or at least an empirical claim) that so-called psychedelic drugs produce psychedelic experiences. One notable exception to this lack of clarity is Carhart-Harris 2018, p. 170, who clearly recognizes this point and also the fact that it often isn’t recognized.
to consider when we think about this objection. It may be that psychedelics do produce mind-revealing experiences, but they tend to produce them with low clarity. That’s a hypothesis that is more specific than the one that just says that psychedelics produce mind-revealing experiences. According to this more specific hypothesis, hallucinations may be like the imperfections in the lens of an old telescope: despite these imperfections, the telescope can still reveal things to us—the craters of the moon, for example. Similarly, another pitfall we can avoid concerns the question of whether meditation produces psychedelic experiences. This question is often asked in a lopsided way, where ‘psychedelic experience’ is used to refer to the kind of experience typically produced by psychedelic drugs. This causes unnecessary confusion, and we can do better by reframing the question as asking whether meditation produces psychedelic experiences understood as mind-revealing experiences. Understanding the question in this way makes it clear that meditation may tend to produce psychedelic experiences that are different from those that tend to be produced by psychedelic substances. For example, one salient hypothesis in this regard is that meditation-induced psychedelic experiences tend to be higher in clarity than those induced by psychedelics. As we’ll see, we need to be careful in how we articulate these hypotheses, and there are many complicating factors that need to be considered.

With these conceptual issues sorted out, we are then ready to begin examining the empirical evidence concerning psychedelic experiences. The first step in this direction is Chapter 5, in which I put forward a unifying theory of the psychedelic experiences induced by psychedelics and meditation in terms of their effects on attention. Psychedelics and meditation are often said to expand awareness, and awareness and attention have an intimate relationship with each other. Some philosophers even think they are identical, but the consensus appears to be that attention and awareness are separable but intimately related (Lopez 2022). Either way, given this close connection between awareness and attention, it stands to reason that psychedelics and meditation must have an important effect on attention. In fact, we’ll see that some meditative practices are, by definition, the repeated and deliberate manipulation of attentional resources. We can see, then, one way in which meditation expands awareness and thus reveals the mind: it helps one allocate attentional resources to things in the mind that don’t normally receive those resources, making it more likely that they appear in awareness. Whereas meditation improves the control over the allocation of one’s attentional resources, I’ll suggest that the effect of psychedelics is to free up one’s attentional resources. These additional resources then have to go somewhere—that is, they end up being reallocated throughout the mind. When this happens, the effect is similar to that of meditation: the parts or aspects of the mind that receive extra attentional resources are more likely to appear in awareness—or to appear in awareness more vividly. I’ll argue that this hypothesis helps us understand the various psychological and phenomenological effects of psychedelics.
It will also help us explain the overlapping and synergistic effects of psychedelics and meditation. The result of this chapter will be a unified theory of how psychedelics and meditation can reveal the mind: they do so by changing how attentional resources are allocated.

In Chapter 6, we will then consider what is, arguably, the simplest kind of psychedelic experience: when a long-lost memory suddenly floods one's consciousness. We are all familiar with such experiences since they can be triggered by the most mundane events, such as when we happen to come across a scent that we haven't smelled since childhood. Although we don't normally think of them in this way, these sorts of memory flashbacks are spontaneous psychedelic experiences—they can happen without unusual interventions such as the consumption of psychedelics or the practice of meditation. Because these experiences are so familiar to us, they provide us with a convenient starting point for studying psychedelic experience as an empirical phenomenon.

Another reason why it is useful to focus on memory in this context is that there is an important relationship between memory and meditative practices that cultivate mindfulness. In various Western/modern contexts, the concept of mindfulness is often defined as paying attention to the present moment in a particular way. However, this sort of definition is mistaken—or at least, it is incomplete. We will see that mindfulness has a subtle but crucial connection to memory that needs to be accounted for in order for us to have a complete understanding of mindfulness. This better understanding of mindfulness will result in two major consequences. The first is that we will establish an elegant connection between psychedelic experience and mindfulness. Roughly speaking, a psychedelic experience is like suddenly finding your keys after having lost them, and mindfulness is like not having lost them in the first place. This connection between psychedelic experience and mindfulness will be especially useful later on, when we begin to consider the relationship between psychedelic experience and wisdom (Chapter 11). It will also help make sense of a somewhat surprising body of evidence: that psychedelics can induce long-lasting improvements in mindfulness. The second major consequence of this better understanding of mindfulness is that it implies that the practice of meditation should have an observable and beneficial impact on one's recollective abilities. Indeed, there is a growing body of scientific research that supports this prediction, and so we will take a look at that literature.

Finally, in this same chapter, we will consider the evidence that psychedelics bring about experiences that involve the recollection of long-lost memories. Based on the fact that such experiences are psychedelic when they happen spontaneously, it seems reasonable to expect that if so-called psychedelics are genuinely deserving of their name, then they should result in these kinds of experiences. With that in

12 The definition is perhaps better understood as a definition of a mindfulness practice rather than mindfulness itself.
mind, we will consider what the evidence says about this prediction. We will see that while the evidence is positive overall, it is only suggestive. One of the major weaknesses of the current body of evidence in this regard is that we lack controlled and well-designed studies that demonstrate that the supposed memories recovered during psychedelic trips are genuine and not merely fantasies that are constructed on the fly.

In Chapter 7, I turn to the common objection that I mentioned earlier: how can the visual hallucinations that psychedelics are renowned for producing possibly count as mind-revealing? As I mentioned, some of the hallucinations may simply be imperfections, and so although they themselves may not be mind-revealing, there may nonetheless be some aspect of the larger experience that is. However, I will argue that at least some hallucinations are, in fact, instances of mind-revelation. My argument for this will involve making a distinction between two kinds of visual hallucinations: (i) simple hallucinations and (ii) complex hallucinations. Simple hallucinations tend to be the colourful geometric patterns that psychedelics are famous for causing. Complex hallucinations tend to involve more meaningful experiences, such as the apparent perception of a person who isn’t real, or walking through an alien city, or talking to a dragon about your life. I’ll argue that both kinds of hallucinations may be mind-revealing, but the simpler ones appear to be the clearest case of hallucinations that are revealing of the mind.

In Chapter 8, I examine how mind-revelation may be responsible for the supposed increases in creativity that psychedelics have a reputation for causing. Indeed, if psychedelics increase creativity, then this may form the basis for an objection to a view such as mine: far from being mind-revealing, it would seem that psychedelics are mind-creating (Shanon 2002). My reply is that a lot of our creativity exists hidden from our awareness and that psychedelics can increase our effective creativity by bringing more of it into our conscious experience. I also argue that meditation has a similar effect and consider the evidence that meditation increases our creativity by revealing the mind. Although it may seem unintuitive at first—that is, that we have hidden creativity that can be revealed—I argue that this view about creativity is well supported by contemporary cognitive science.

In Chapter 9, the next issue we will tackle concerns the extent to which the psychotherapeutic benefits of psychedelics and meditation can be explained in terms of their tendency to produce mind-revealing experiences. This is an important issue to consider because it is the therapeutic value of these interventions that is the primary driver for most of the current research, especially in the case of psychedelics. We don’t yet know how to explain these effects, but some plausible hypotheses have been put forward. One natural hypothesis to consider is that by inducing psychedelic experiences, psychedelics facilitate psychological insights, which either have immediate therapeutic value in themselves or enable substantial and long-term improvements in behaviour and thinking.
A similar explanation could be put forward for meditation: various meditative practices are known to reliably afford psychological insights. I think there is some truth to these explanations, but they are also somewhat incomplete. I will argue that there is a more comprehensive explanation available: with the appropriate qualifications in place, both psychedelics and meditation tend to result in increases in mindfulness, which is what is ultimately responsible for the therapeutic benefits we observe (or at least, a substantial portion of them). My argument will rely on the connection between psychedelic experience and mindfulness that is established in Chapter 6. Considering this explanation in terms of mindfulness can help us appreciate how psychedelics and meditation may benefit our well-being in general, which will help pave the way for some of the arguments in Chapter 11 concerning how psychedelics and meditation may enhance our wisdom.

In Chapter 10, I turn to the topic of mystical experience. This is necessary because both psychedelics and meditation are widely reported to lead to mystical experiences, which are often thought of as peak or maximally psychedelic experiences. Since the conceptual framework of psychedelic space is designed to account for experiences being more or less psychedelic, mystical experience presents us with an important test case. A natural question to consider is whether mystical experience can be located within psychedelic space as a maximally psychedelic experience—that is, an experience that maximizes the four dimensions of scope, clarity, novelty, and duration. I’ll argue that there is a sense in which we can’t answer this question. This is because mystical experiences are deeply ineffable and, as a result, they form a kind of singularity for analytic philosophy (and any downstream field of investigation). The best we can do is to reason around the experience, which the framework of psychedelic space allows us to do. So, although we can’t speak directly to the question of whether mystical experiences are maximally psychedelic—or even if they are psychedelic to any degree—we will be able to develop an understanding of them that is still valuable.

In Chapter 11, I argue that psychedelic experience, when appropriately engaged with, is conducive to wisdom. It is important to be clear upfront that this is not the same as the statement that consuming psychedelics is conducive to wisdom. Indeed, if psychedelics tend to produce psychedelic experiences that are very low in clarity, then they may do more harm than good when it comes to wisdom. Moreover, whereas many of the effects of psychedelics are clearly temporary, the effects of meditation appear to be more enduring. In so far as we think that being wise is a stable, long-term attribute of a person, then it could be that meditation may be more conducive to wisdom than psychedelics are. At any rate, we needn’t take a stand on such issues here—psychedelics and meditation may provide different and complementary methods for cultivating wisdom. In this chapter, I will unpack in more detail how psychedelic experience, regardless of how it is brought about, can help us become wiser. This gives rise to a different way of doing philosophy, which I will refer to as psychedelic philosophy.
Finally, in Chapter 12, I will bring everything together with some concluding remarks.

We’ve already covered a lot of territory in this introductory chapter. We’ll now go back over it more carefully. In the next chapter, we will start with our central question: what is psychedelic experience? That will help us get a better idea of what that question is asking, why we should ask it, and how we can go about in trying to answer it.
2
What Is Psychedelic Experience?

2.1 Introduction

Every year in the former USSR, children across the region drowned an untold number of guinea pigs. What on Earth did these children have against these poor animals, you may wonder?

Well, it turns out that the Russian name for guinea pig is morskaya svinka, which literally means ‘sea pig’. Because of this name, some of the children thought that guinea pigs live in the sea. Naturally, some of these well-intentioned children ended up finding a home for their guinea pigs in containers filled with water, and the inevitable happened. What the children didn't realize is that the name morskaya svinka is likely an abbreviation of zamorskaya svinka, which means ‘overseas pig’, indicating that the animals come from overseas. If the children understood the real meaning of the name of their pets, they wouldn’t conceive of them as animals that live in water, and they would be less likely to drown them.1

Psychedelic experiences are like guinea pigs in the former USSR. Some of us have the wrong idea about what they are, and because of this, we make some serious mistakes in how we think about them. The goal of this chapter is to take a first step in correcting our misconceptions about psychedelic experiences by returning to the original sense of psychedelic experience as a mind-revealing experience. I’ll argue that this is not only the original meaning of ‘psychedelic experience’, but that this meaning is also better than other contemporary understandings of the term.

We will begin, in Section 2.2, by reflecting on how the term ‘psychedelic experience’ was first introduced. This will give us a better understanding of the question and an initial sketch of what a psychedelic experience is. In Section 2.3, I will discuss some crucial methodological points about how we should proceed in answering the question and in developing the definition of psychedelic experience. This will set up the basic rules for the rest of the book and thus determine how the entire project ought to be evaluated.

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1 Fortunately, awareness of this mistake is growing, and it is becoming increasingly rare.
2.2 The Question

What is psychedelic experience? At first glance, it might seem as though we don’t need to spend much time on grappling with the meaning of this question. After all, it appears to be clear enough since it seems to simply ask about the kind of experience that people typically have after consuming a psychedelic drug. Can’t we go straight to explaining what people experience when they are in such a state? Similarly, can’t we just start answering other related questions, such as whether meditation also produces psychedelic experiences?

Unfortunately, we can’t. The problem is that the concept of psychedelic experience is not as clear-cut as it may initially seem. In part, this is because the meaning of ‘psychedelic’ has evolved over time and come to take on all sorts of meanings. As Brian Wells noted, the term ‘psychedelic’ underwent a semantic shift in the 1960s and early 1970s, and soon came to mean ‘anything in youth culture which is colourful, or unusual, or fashionable’ (Wells 1974, pp. 19–20). The term also often—but not always—functions as a name for a class of substances with some family resemblance to the so-called “classic” psychedelics, such as LSD, psilocybin, and mescaline (Nichols 1986, p. 306). However, the original meaning of the term is also still in use. For example, in the foreword to the edited collection Manifesting Minds, Rick Doblin and Brad Burge write:

[... ] above all else, psychedelic describes what happens when the contents of the mind and body are made more visible or more clear—in other words, when the mind is manifested. This process by which hidden memories and experiences are revealed is both feared and revered in our society.

Doblin and Burge 2014, p. x

Later on, we will unpack this meaning in more detail and see another notable example of it being used in the scientific literature. The essential point for now is that different people mean different things by ‘psychedelic’, and so it isn’t immediately clear what we are asking when we ask what a psychedelic experience is. It follows, then, that we need to define our concept of psychedelic experience.

To do this, there are two main strategies available to us. The first is to identify some version of the concept that is currently in use and then say explicitly what that concept is. For example, one common conception in use today (especially in informal contexts) would be that of a “weird” or “mind-bending” or “trippy” experience. So we could try to unpack this idea and give it a more precise definition. Alternatively, another conception in use today is that a psychedelic experience is an experience induced by certain drugs, such as mescaline, psilocybin, LSD, and so on.2 We could then, similarly, choose to unpack this idea and give it a precise

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2 For example, the Wikipedia entry on psychedelic experience currently defines it as: ‘a temporary altered state of consciousness induced by the consumption of a psychedelic substance (most commonly LSD, mescaline, psilocybin mushrooms, or DMT).’
definition. Those are two examples of how we can pursue the first strategy available to us. The second strategy is to return to the original concept of psychedelic experience, understood as a mind-revealing experience, and then see if we can define it more precisely. It is this second strategy that I will pursue in this book.

The main reason for pursuing this second strategy is that it ultimately provides us with a definition of psychedelic experience that is more useful for scientific and philosophical purposes. This stems, in part, from the fact that the term’s original meaning was carefully designed to capture a core insight concerning the nature of the experiences produced by the substances in question. It is also because this approach gives us a broader conceptualization of psychedelic experience that allows us to connect it with other important notions we have. Ultimately, whichever strategy we choose should be judged by the fruit it bears. Can it be used to give good explanations of known phenomena? Does it help us avoid unnecessary confusion? Does it give us a precise concept that is linked to other well-defined concepts that we already have? Does it give us the conceptual flexibility to identify and evaluate new hypotheses and theories? And so on. These are standard criteria for any successful definition of a concept, but they are critical in this context since the topic of psychedelic experience can be a conceptual minefield. A goal of this book is to demonstrate that the second strategy for defining the concept of psychedelic experience pays off best in terms of meeting these criteria.

The term ‘psychedelic’ was first introduced by the psychiatrist Humphry Osmond in 1957 as he thought it to be the most appropriate name for the class of drugs in question, which at the time had captured the attention of psychiatrists and psychologists (as well as the wider public). Before Osmond, these drugs received a variety of other names. One popular name for them was ‘hallucinogen’, signifying that these drugs produce hallucinations. Another common term in use was ‘psychotomimetic’, indicating that these drugs produce psychological states that resemble psychosis. Osmond argued that these names were inappropriate because they failed to capture the core characteristic of the experiences that the drugs tend to produce. He believed that the term ‘psychedelic’ did a much better job in this respect, and we will see why in a moment.

An important point that is often overlooked is that each of these names implies a different hypothesis about the effects of the drugs. For example, by calling a drug a ‘psychotomimetic’, one implies that the production of psychosis-like states is a central characteristic of the drug. Similarly, by calling a drug a ‘hallucinogen’, one implies that the production of hallucinations is a central characteristic of the drug. These are empirical hypotheses that may be true or false. So, by suggesting that we call these drugs ‘psychedelic’, Osmond intended to introduce a new hypothesis about their central characteristic—namely, that they produce psychedelic experiences. It then follows that in order to sensibly advance such a hypothesis, Osmond must have had some independent conception of what a psychedelic experience is. Otherwise, his hypothesis would be circular and meaningless.

This point becomes clear when we consider how the other hypotheses work in this regard. For example, consider the ‘hallucinogenic’ hypothesis. A common
definition of ‘hallucination’ is that it is an apparent perception of an object that is not actually present. Clearly, this definition does not refer to drugs in any way. The terms involved in the definition only refer to other things—apparent perception, an object, and actual presence. This is important because if we did not have some independent grasp of the concept of hallucination, then we would not know what it would mean for the drugs to be hallucinogens. Consequently, we wouldn’t know what would count as evidence for or against that hypothesis. Therefore, when Osmond argued that the drugs in question are neither psychotomimetics nor hallucinogens, and put forward the alternative claim that they are psychedelics, he must have had some independent understanding of that concept.

It is clear, then, that there must be some way to understand the concept of psychedelic experience independently of the drugs in question. However, this observation introduces a complication: whereas the concept of hallucination was familiar to most people in 1957, the concept of psychedelic experience was not. This is because Osmond introduced ‘psychedelic’ as a new term of art. He intended it to be a technical term that expressed a new idea—or, at least, one that hadn’t yet been clearly recognized in connection with the drugs in question. Because of this, Osmond needed to explain the new idea, either by defining it carefully or at least by providing some sketch of its meaning. Without doing so, he could have just as well given the drugs some completely meaningless name, like fumble-wumbles. Therefore, Osmond not only had to have a concept that could be understood independently of the drugs in question, but he also had to explain its meaning—at least, in rough outline.

Indeed, this is exactly what Osmond did. His sketch of the concept was contained in the term’s etymology and in his consideration of alternatives:

I have tried to find an appropriate name for the agents under discussion: a name that will include the concepts of enriching the mind and enlarging the vision. Some possibilities are: psychophoric, mind-moving; psychehormic, mind-rousing; and psycheplastic, mind-molding. Psychyzmic, mind-fermenting, is indeed appropriate. Psycherhexic, mind bursting forth, though difficult, is memorable. Psychelytic, mind-releasing, is satisfactory. My choice, because it is clear, euphonious, and uncontaminated by other associations, is psychedelic, mind-manifesting.

Osmond 1957, p. 429

As we can see, Osmond’s idea was that the drugs in question produce experiences that involve the mind manifesting or revealing itself. If correct, this was a major

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3 Cases of veridical hallucination may be possible (Lewis 1980), but these subtleties won’t concern us here.

4 The term ‘psychedelic’, when used in the sense of mind-manifestation, has become synonymous with the term ‘mind-revelation’. I will follow suit and treat this as a purely terminological choice.
insight with potentially paradigm-changing implications. In this single paragraph, Osmond was simultaneously performing two significant tasks: (i) introducing the concept of a psychedelic experience and (ii) proposing the hypothesis that the drugs in question produce psychedelic experiences. However, this was a lot to happen all at once. Such a major insight ought to be unpacked carefully so that the concept and the hypothesis are disentangled from each other. That will be the primary task for the following two chapters, with Chapter 3 defining the concept more precisely and Chapter 4 exploring the range of hypotheses involving the concept that we may consider evaluating.

To better understand why Osmond identified these drugs by this name, it will help to retrace his thought process. Prior to coining his new term, he and Aldous Huxley had already been discussing this issue for a few years. In their exchanges, we see that they were looking for a name that would capture the mind-revealing aspect of the experiences that they thought the drugs induced. In a letter to Huxley, we see Osmond exploring the issue:

It is absurd [...] to label them as psychotomimetics. I make several suggestions, have you any other ones? [...] The name should have a clear meaning, be reasonably easy to spell and pronounce and not be too like some other name. Psychophrenics had to be abandoned and so did psychoplastics. Psychorhexics and psychohormics are doubtful. So far psychodelics-mind manifestors seems the most promising, psycholytics-mind releasers is doubtful because lysis in medicine is now associated with dissolution rather than release. Euletheropsychics, though accurate and euphonious is too much of a mouthful. Psychodelics seems unambiguous, not loaded with old associations and clear.

Osmond, 25 March 1956⁵

And then Huxley replies:

About a name for these drugs—what a problem! I have looked into Liddell and Scott and find that there is a verb phaneroein, ‘to make visible or manifest,’ and an adjective phaneros, meaning ‘manifest, open to sight, evident.’ The word is used in botany—phanerogam as opposed to cryptogam. Psychodetic is something I don't quite get the hang of.⁶ Is it an analogue of geodetic, geodesy? If so, it would mean mind-dividing, as geodesy means earth-dividing, from ge and daiein. Could you call these drugs psychphans? Or phaneropsychic drugs? Or what about phanerothymes? Thumos means soul, in its primary usage, and is the equivalent of Latin animus. The word is euphonious and easy to pronounce; besides it has

⁶ It appears that Huxley misread Osmond's suggestion of 'psychodelic' as 'psychodetic', which would explain why he was initially confused by Osmond's proposal.
relatives in the jargon of psychology—e.g. cyclothyme. On the whole I think this is better than psychophan or phaneropsychic.

Huxley, 30 March 1956⁷

Following up on that letter, Huxley continues:

Psychedetic seems to me wrong, as it would mean mind-dividing (on the analogy of geodetic) rather than mind revealing. Revealing would be phaneros, phaneroein. So you get either phaneropsychic, or psychophan or (as I feel, much better) phanerothyme as a substantive and phanerothymic as the adjective. Thumos is the Greek equivalent of Latin animus and, in its primary sense, signifies soul. (Phaneros means evident, manifest, open to sight. Phaneroein means to make manifest, make visible.)

Huxley, April 1956⁸

A passage from one of Osmond’s letters a year later also makes it clear that he was not necessarily concerned with the drugs themselves, but with the experiences they produce:

I can’t see any point in considering an experience of the other derived from epilepsy, schizophrenia, starvation, flagellation, vitamin deficiency, the reduced environment, dervish dancing, yogistic practices, more or less valuable than one derived from hashish, soma, peyote, cohoba, ololiuqui, harmola, ayahuesca, cohoba, amanita muscaria, Wasson’s new ones [psilocybin mushrooms], or for that matter mescaline, LSD-25, TAM, LSM, adrenochrome, adrenolutin, Alles’ compounds [amphetamines], or Szára’s DMT and T-9 which are derivatives of the amino acid tryptophan. It is all one to me. The whole point is whether the experience justifies the risk, discomfort or time involved and whether its fruits are good or evil.

Osmond, June 1957 (emphasis added)⁹

Clearly, then, the concept of psychedelic experience can be understood independently of the drugs in question. This is because we have an independent grasp of the component concepts: we have some idea of what the mind is, what it means to reveal something, and what it means to have an experience. Although we do not yet know precisely what a mind-revealing experience is, we can nevertheless see how it can be understood without any reference to drugs: it has something to

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do with the mind being hidden or obscured in some way and then being revealed or made visible. Clearly, more needs to be said about what this idea amounts to, which is one of this book’s main tasks. However, the important takeaway here is that we can understand the concept of psychedelic experience independently of any drug that may cause such an experience. Consequently, the phenomenon of psychedelic experience is more general than that of an experience induced by the consumption of a so-called psychedelic drug.

To some readers, it may seem that I am belabouring this point. However, the reason I am unpacking it in such a painstaking manner is because this important point is so easily misunderstood. As I noted earlier, the term ‘psychedelic’ has evolved over the decades since to take on several meanings, and this can cloud discussions with unnecessary confusion. For instance, because the meaning of the term ‘psychedelic’ is sometimes heavily anchored on the drugs in question (and on popular conceptions of their effects), it is difficult to ask if anything else is psychedelic. If someone were to ask, for example, whether meditation also produces psychedelic experiences, then that question would be understood—in this drug-oriented way—as asking whether meditation produces experiences that are the same as those that psychedelics produce. One might then reasonably reply that the answer is no simply because the drug-induced experiences can be so unlike the meditative ones.

In contrast, if we understand the question as asking whether meditation also produces mind-revealing experiences, then we can see that the answer could easily be yes, even though the experiences induced by psychedelics and meditation have substantial differences. The point can be illustrated using an analogy with restaurant experiences: even though one’s experience of a sushi restaurant in Tokyo may differ substantially from one’s experience of a Mughlai restaurant in Srinagar, they are both recognizable as restaurant experiences. Accordingly, both meditation and psychedelics may be methods for producing psychedelic experiences—understood as mind-revealing experiences—and it may be that they produce mind-revealing experiences of different kinds. It is difficult to achieve this kind of flexibility and clarity in our thinking if we discard Osmond’s original conception of a psychedelic experience.

Among psychedelics enthusiasts (and especially the evangelists), merely considering the possibility that psychedelic drugs are not actually psychedelic might be seen as a form of blasphemy. However, if our desire to understand these experiences is genuine, then we need to be open to the possibility that psychedelics are not actually psychedelic. Alternatively, perhaps they are psychedelic, but not as psychedelic as the enthusiasts like to think. Or, still further, maybe they are considerably psychedelic, but only in a particular way, implying that there are other ways of being psychedelic.

In this regard, it is worth noting that Robin Carhart-Harris, one of the world’s leading psychedelic researchers, makes a similar observation:
Thankfully, the true origin and meaning of [the] neologism ‘psychedelic’ is becoming increasingly well recognized and understood. It dates back to the mid-1950s and an exchange between two Brits (one, the famous author, Aldous Huxley) in which they sought to find a more appropriate term for these compounds (Huxley et al. 1977). The objective was to devise a word that would better capture their core psychological properties than the relatively shallow and arguably misleading alternative ‘hallucinogen’. It was Huxley’s interlocutor, the psychiatrist and psychedelic research pioneer Humphrey Osmond who would coin the term ‘psychedelic’—combining two ancient Greek words for ‘mind’ or ‘soul’ (psyche) and ‘to reveal’ or make manifest’ or ‘visible’ (delein)—to lay principal emphasis on these compounds’ mind-revealing effects. The notion that a principal property of psychedelics is their ability to reveal aspects of the mind that are normally not fully visible, was (Cohen 1964, Grof 1975, Sandison et al. 1954), and remains (Carhart-Harris and Friston 2010, Krahenmann et al. 2017, Krahenmann et al. 2017, Richards 2015), widely accepted among those most familiar with their effects, if through direct personal experience, or second or third-hand observation. Remarkably however, that psychedelics do this, remains a mere assumption/hypothesis that has never been systematically measured and tested, and therefore given an opportunity to be verified or falsified.

It seems reasonable to begin by acknowledging that this relatively major oversight may be explainable—if not excusable—by the unreasonable difficulty of conducting human research with psychedelics (Nutt et al. 2013), let alone testing such an abstract and paradigm-challenging idea.

Carhart-Harris 2018, p. 170 (emphasis added)

Carhart-Harris then goes on to operationalize the idea of mind-revelation in a specific way, namely, by defining emotional insight as a kind of mind-revelation. He then considers whether psychedelic drugs may facilitate or enhance subjects’ abilities to have emotional insights (Carbonaro et al. 2017). Carhart-Harris’ strategy exemplifies how we should proceed: we first clarify what it means to have a mind-revealing experience and then consider the evidence that something—say, a particular drug—tends to produce such experiences. Emotional insight is one way the mind may be revealed; however, as we will see in the next chapter, there are many others as well.

Separating the concept and hypothesis in this way gives us a cleaner way of approaching our topic. Once we have unpacked the idea of a psychedelic experience, we can consider which of our experiences are psychedelic. Perhaps the experiences that people have after consuming a drug such as psilocybin are psychedelic, but perhaps other experiences are psychedelic as well. It may even be that some people have psychedelic experiences in response to substances that are not typically considered psychedelic. For example, in Chapter 8,
we will see that Henri Poincaré had a psychedelic experience after drinking coffee.\(^{10}\)

Moreover, if, in unpacking the idea of a psychedelic experience, we find that there are different kinds of psychedelic experiences, then even more possibilities arise. It may be that psychedelics tend to induce psychedelic experiences of a particular kind, while meditation may tend to induce psychedelic experiences of another kind. We may also consider the possibility that different kinds of psychedelics reliably produce different kinds of psychedelic experiences. And so on. The possibilities are endless, and they come more clearly into our view when we clean up our concepts.\(^{11}\)

With this perspective in place, there is one terminological issue that needs to be sorted out: we need some convenient way of referring to the series of experiences that one typically has after consuming a psychedelic drug. For convenience, I will stick to what has become convention and refer to these as psychedelic trips or psychedelic sessions. Thus, a psychedelic trip is a series of experiences one has after consuming a psychedelic drug, but those experiences may or may not be psychedelic (i.e. mind-revealing)—and some may be psychedelic, while others are not. This terminological setup is not ideal, but it is a reasonable compromise between how these terms are now commonly used and the mission of staying true to the original meaning of ‘psychedelic’.

To summarize, our question is about the concept of psychedelic experience. So far, we only have a rather rough understanding of this concept: we know it has something to do with revealing the mind in some way. In order for us to answer the question—and thus develop a more precise understanding of psychedelic experience—we first need to sort out our methodology for doing so.

### 2.3 Methodology

Now that we have clarified the question, let’s consider how we should go about answering it.

Since our central question is a conceptual one, the most suitable way of answering it is by using some method of conceptual analysis (broadly construed). Moreover, since the concept in question is relatively new, largely undefined, and intended for scientific and philosophical discourse, the most appropriate kind of method would be one of conceptual explication.

\(^{10}\) For what it’s worth, several friends have also reported experiencing similar effects from coffee.

\(^{11}\) Concepts are like mental lenses. By cleaning them up and choosing them carefully, we can put our experiences more sharply into focus. As we will see in the coming chapters, the practice of meditation can also be extremely useful in this process. It can help us notice when our concepts are distorting our experiences and help us become more flexible in adapting our conceptual schemes to whatever is present.