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"To learn healing knowledge": Philosophy, psychedelic studies and transformation

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"Philosophical learning" may be summarised in Sobiecki's fitting catchphrase "to learn healing knowledge". This catchphrase is taken from an article on the use of psychoactive plants among southern African diviners. In the spirit of this link, I aim to challenge contemporary negative attitudes to the topic of psychedelics, and argue that there are good reasons for philosophers to pay attention to the role that the psychedelic experience can play in promoting philosophical perception. I argue first that the results of some contemporary studies affirm the benefits of psychedelic use in an "orchestrated guided experience". Secondly, I argue that the aims of such "orchestrated guided experiences" are consonant with the nature of philosophical learning. Philosophy, understood as a learning practice, has a strong historical precedent and ties to contemporary indigenous cultural practices. Here I cite research into the use of psychedelics and the Eleusinian Mysteries at the origin of Western philosophy. Numerous cultures, ancient and contemporary, venerate psychoactive substances as agents of learning, healing, and transformation. Thus, contemporary mainstream philosophy may have opportunities to learn, or relearn, from southern African indigenous cultural practices. Considering the positive light in which the topic of psychedelics will be painted, I will conclude by suggesting that psychedelics have the potential to play an important role in fostering the deeply transformative "philosophical learning" that is the condition for positive social change. This makes the topic of psychedelics worthy of philosophical reflection.

Introduction

All psychedelics are illegal.[1] In most countries, penalties for possession of these substances are severe and a person may spend many years in jail if convicted for a drug offence. In this context of illegality, it is unsurprising that the topic of psychedelics is often taboo. However, as pointed out in *The Lancet* (2006), the taboo status of psychedelics is based on social and legal concerns that do not correspond to scientific evidence:

> Exaggerated risks of harm have contributed to the demonisation of psychedelic drugs as a social evil. But although this dangerous reputation – generated and perpetuated by the often disproportionately stiff penalties for their use – is helpful for law enforcement, it does not correspond to the evidence. Rather, the social prescription against psychedelic drugs that hinders properly controlled research into their effects and side effects is largely based on social and legal, as opposed to scientific, concerns.

"The new science of psychedelics" – which is a phrase used by the renowned author Michael Pollan in the title of his 2018 book, *How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics*

1 To list a few obvious ones: "magic" mushrooms containing the psilocybin molecule; mescaline from certain cacti; lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD); ayauscha and Dimethyltryptamine (DMT); Methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA, which is not a "classic" psychedelic but does induce some psychedelic effects).

Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence – shows unambiguously that psychedelics have a bright side, so to speak. In the discussion to follow, I will show that orchestrated psychedelic experiences are being used in therapeutic contexts to promote psychological healing. This has bearing on questions of identity and social cohesion. Further, the purpose of the experiences orchestrated via the psychoactive plant-medicines used by various indigenous cultures for centuries is to "to learn healing knowledge" (Sobiecki 2012, 219). Philosophy as practised by ancient philosophers also shares a conspicuously similar intent. This is unsurprising considering the strong arguments for the centrality of a highly venerated ancient Greek ritual (the Eleusinian Mysteries) that induced either a literal psychedelic experience, or an experience fully coterminous with it. It is therefore possible to conceptualise psychedelic consciousness and philosophical consciousness alongside each other, and to emphasise that psychedelic studies are relevant to contemporary scientific endeavours, philosophy, and indigenous cultural practices. The study of psychedelics can therefore be investigated for its possible transdisciplinary and cross-cultural contributions to the promotion of healing knowledge.

The new science of psychedelics

For most of this section, the results of various scientific studies should "speak for themselves". Methodologically, this initial approach is important because the themes and information in this section will serve as the foundation from which links will be made to resonant themes concerning philosophy and indigenous cultural practice. The studies are often funded by credible institutions (such as Johns Hopkins University, UCLA, and NYU) using credible methodologies (usually the randomised double-blind approach), which is important to remember when considering what may seem to be the "incredible" descriptions of the orchestrated psychedelic experience and the results attained from the careful use of psychedelic substances combined with psychotherapy. Towards the end of this section, I will collate several more generalised observations made by psychedelic researchers about the psychedelic experience.

In a 2016 study titled "Rapid and sustained symptom reduction following psilocybin treatment for anxiety and depression in patients with life-threatening cancer: a randomized controlled trial", published in the *Journal of Psychopharmacology*, the following results are specified:

> [P]silocybin produced immediate, substantial, and sustained improvements in anxiety and depression and led to decreases in cancer-related demoralization and hopelessness, improved spiritual wellbeing, and increased quality of life. At the 6.5-month follow-up, psilocybin was associated with enduring anxiolytic and anti-depressant effects (approximately 60–80% of participants continued with clinically significant reductions in depression or anxiety), sustained benefits in existential distress and quality of life, as well as improved attitudes towards death. The psilocybin-induced mystical experience mediated the therapeutic effect of psilocybin on anxiety and depression (Ross et al. 2016, 1165).

In a similar 2016 study titled "Psilocybin produces substantial and sustained decreases in depression and anxiety in patients with life-threatening cancer: A randomized double-blind trial", also published in the *Journal of Psychopharmacology*, the following results are specified:

> High-dose psilocybin produced large decreases in clinician- and self-rated measures of depressed mood and anxiety, along with increases in quality of life, life meaning, and optimism, and decreases in death anxiety. At 6-month follow-up, these changes were sustained, with about 80% of participants continuing to show clinically significant decreases in depressed mood and anxiety. Participants attributed improvements in attitudes about life/self, mood, relationships, and spirituality to the high-dose experience, with >80% endorsing moderately or greater increased well-being/life satisfaction. Community observer ratings showed corresponding changes. Mystical-type psilocybin experience on session day mediated the effect of psilocybin dose on therapeutic outcomes (Griffiths et al. 2016, 1181).

In 2017, a study titled "Long-term follow-up of psilocybin-facilitated smoking cessation", which focused longitudinally on 15 participants, was published in the American *Journal of Drug and*

Alcohol Abuse. In the study the following is recorded:

> At long-term follow-up, nine participants (60%) were confirmed as smoking abstinent. At 12-month follow-up 13 participants (86.7%) rated their psilocybin experiences among the five most personally meaningful and spiritually significant experiences of their lives (Johnson, Garcia-Romeu, and Griffiths 2017, 55).

In a 2017 study titled "Psilocybin-occasioned mystical-type experience in combination with meditation and other spiritual practices produces enduring positive changes in psychological functioning and in trait measures of prosocial attitudes and behaviors", published in the *Journal of Psychopharmacology* in 2018, the following is specified:

> Compared with low-dose, high-dose psilocybin produced greater acute and persisting effects. At 6 months… both high-dose groups showed large significant positive changes on longitudinal measures of interpersonal closeness, gratitude, life meaning/purpose, forgiveness, death transcendence, daily spiritual experiences, religious faith and coping, and community observer ratings. Determinants of enduring effects were psilocybin-occasioned mystical-type experience and rates of meditation/spiritual practices. Psilocybin can occasion enduring trait-level increases in prosocial attitudes/behaviors and in healthy psychological functioning (Griffiths et al. 2018, 49).

In another article published in the *Journal of Psychopharmacology*, titled "Increased nature relatedness and decreased authoritarian political views after psilocybin for treatment-resistant depression", the following is recorded:

> In the general population, psychedelic drug use is not associated with increased incidence of mental health problems (Johansen and Krebs, 2015; Krebs and Johansen, 2013), but is instead associated with lower rates of suicidality and psychological distress (Hendricks et al., 2015a, 2015b; Johansen and Krebs, 2015; Krebs and Johansen, 2013). Psychedelic drug users have also been shown to exhibit greater optimism (or reduced pessimism) than non-users (Grob et al., 1996) as well as increased concern for others, nature and the environment when compared with users of cannabis, amphetamine or heroin (Lerner and Lyvers, 2006). Experience with psychedelics has been found to positively affect one's sense of feeling part of nature rather than separate from it, leading to pro-environmental behavioural changes (Forstmann and Sagioglou, 2017) (Lyons and Carhart-Harris 2018, 270).

MAPS, the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Study, has taken MDMA therapy trails through FDA-approved phase 2, which is no small undertaking in the USA considering the strict requirements of the regulatory processes for clinical trials. A major breakthrough has occurred since the phase 2 trials: "On July 28, 2017, MAPS and the FDA reached agreement on the Special Protocol Assessment for Phase 3 clinical trials", which confirms "that the protocol design, clinical endpoints, planned conduct, and statistical analyses for the Phase 3 trials…are acceptable to support regulatory approval by the FDA". The following summary of numerous trials is provided at the MAPS website:

> Phase 2 clinical trials have shown that MDMA can reduce fear and defensiveness, enhance communication and introspection, and increase empathy and compassion, enhancing the therapeutic process for people suffering from PTSD [post-traumatic stress syndrome]. In MAPS' completed Phase 2 trials with 107 participants, 61% no longer qualified for PTSD after three sessions of MDMA-assisted psychotherapy two months following treatment. At the 12-month follow-up, 68% no longer had PTSD. All participants had chronic, treatment-resistant PTSD, and had suffered from PTSD for an average of 17.8 years.

I have listed some findings from five published articles, and quoted from a summary of MAPS findings. This methodology could go on indefinitely due to the several dozen similar studies and results, many of which are compiled at various institutions' websites (for example, the Heffter Institute and the Beckley Foundation). One more article, this time published in the *Journal*

of Humanistic Psychology, must feature in this section because in it some important themes and information are emphasised that explicitly depict the psychedelic experience as profoundly transformative, which should already be clear from the previous studies' results. The researchers employed semi-structured interviews to ascertain from thirteen "adult participants aged 22 to 69 years…with clinically elevated anxiety associated with a cancer diagnosis" the qualitative impacts of psychedelic therapy. Here follows a summary of the findings:

> General themes found in all or nearly all transcripts included relational embeddedness, emotional range, the role of music as conveyor of experience, meaningful visual phenomena, wisdom lessons, revised life priorities, and a desire to repeat the psilocybin experience. Typical themes found in the majority of transcripts included the following: exalted feelings of joy, bliss, and love; embodiment; ineffability; alterations to identity; a movement from feelings of separateness to interconnectedness; experiences of transient psychological distress; the appearance of loved ones as guiding spirits; and sharing the experience with loved ones post treatment. Variant themes found in a minority of participant transcripts include lasting changes to sense of identity, synesthesia experiences, catharsis of powerful emotion, improved relationships after treatment, surrender or "letting go", forgiveness, and a continued struggle to integrate experience (Belser et al. 2017, 354).

There has been a large focus on the impact of psilocybin in this section, with MDMA featuring once. However, studies are available on all of the psychedelic substances listed at the start of this article, and I have not found any rigorously conducted study or trial that either does not put the careful use of a psychedelic substance in a positive light, or emphasise the profundity of the psychedelic experience. The respected researcher Stanislav Grof, for example, speaking about his work with LSD, had the following to say:

> [T]his substance is an unspecific amplifier of mental processes that brings to the surface various elements from the depth of the unconscious. What we see in the LSD experiences and in various situations surrounding them appears to be basically an exteriorization and magnification of the conflicts intrinsic to human nature and civilization. If approached from this point of view, LSD phenomena are extremely interesting material for a deeper understanding of the mind, the nature of man, and human society (Grof 1975, 6).

Grof went so far as to suggest that work with altered states of consciousness, such as the states of consciousness induced by taking a psychedelic substance, may play a role in increasing "our chances of planetary survival":

> Deep reverence for life and ecological awareness are among the most frequent consequences of the psychospiritual transformation that accompanies responsible work with non-ordinary states of consciousness. The same has been true for spiritual emergence of a mystical nature that is based on personal experience. It is my belief that a movement in the direction of a fuller awareness of our unconscious minds will vastly increase our chances of planetary survival (Grof 1992, 212).

Grof's sentiments might seem a step too far in comparison to the methodological rigour of contemporary clinical studies. However, evident in the results of contemporary clinical studies are "peak experiences" facilitated by the psychedelic under scrutiny in any given study, and it is frequently the case that researchers see beyond necessarily limited clinical scopes. For example, Lester Grinspoon, MD, an associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School (HMS), and his colleague James B. Bakalar, the associate editor of the *Harvard Mental Health Letter* and a lecturer in law in the department of psychiatry at HMS, state the following (1997, 195):

> Psychedelic therapy has an analogue in Abraham Maslow's idea of the peak experience. The drug taker feels somehow allied with a higher power; he becomes convinced that he is part of a much larger pattern, and the sense of cleaning, release, and joy makes old woes seem trivial.

Gary Fisher, a clinical psychologist, places emphasis on the role of psychedelics beyond the confines of the purposes to which psychedelics are put in clinical conditions:

> Fortunately, after a successful psychedelic experience, you never go back to your previous state of consciousness – that's the whole point of taking psychedelics. If you don't integrate the higher levels of consciousness into your daily life, then the trip has been irrelevant… If a psychedelic doesn't result in your becoming a human being who is more human, then psychedelics are meaningless and don't make a difference. I have never known anyone who had a profound transcendental experience who wasn't significantly changed in his or her daily life by that experience (Fisher, in Walsh and Grob 2005, 112).

To be sure, there are some risks in the psychedelic undertaking, just as there are risks in an endless array of human endeavours, but when psychological screening of potential patients is carried out, as is always the case in the trials and studies listed here and elsewhere, and when the patients are "guided" by a trained administrator and later allowed to integrate their experience proactively via psychotherapy, the results are overwhelmingly positive. The word "positive" may be grossly inappropriate, considering that, as has already been seen, patients rated their psychedelic experience "among the five most personally meaningful and spiritually significant experiences of their lives" (Johnson, Garcia-Romeu, and Griffiths 2017, 55) – this is surely another articulation of the concept of a "peak experience". It is with the demonstrable facts made available in the psychedelic studies in mind, as well as the broader notion of the "peak experience" that facilitates a profound transformation in the participant of the orchestrated psychedelic experience, that attention can now be given to the character of philosophical perception, which is consonant with at least some important aspects of the psychedelic experience.

The transformative character of philosophical perception

After his research into ancient Greek and Hellenistic philosophy, Pierre Hadot (1995) makes numerous observations about the transformative character of philosophy as it was practised in ancient times. These were times during which philosophy was practised as a way of life. A useful starting point in understanding the philosophical transformation of perception that Hadot observes is Seneca's experiences with the contemplation of wisdom. This is a philosophical endeavour frequently associated with ancient philosophers: "I look at [wisdom] with the same stupefaction with which, on other occasions, I look at the world; this world that I quite often feel as though I were seeing for the first time" (Hadot 1995, 257). Hadot (ibid.) comments on Seneca's sentiment as follows:

> If Seneca speaks of stupefaction, it is because he sometimes finds that he discovers the world all of a sudden, "as though [he] were seeing it for the first time". At such moments, he becomes conscious of the transformation taking place in his perception of the world. Normally, he had not been in the habit of seeing the world, and consequently was not astonished by it. Now, all of a sudden, he is stupefied, because he sees the world with new eyes.

"Seeing the world with new eyes" clearly denotes a transformation, and Hadot elaborates on the nature of the transformation brought about by philosophical perception by referring to some observations made by Henri Bergson. Hadot (1995, 254) first cites Bergson's account of habitual perception, which is the perception aligned with utilitarianism and pragmatism. Bergson writes that

> [l]ife requires that we put on blinkers; we must not look to the right, to the left, or behind, but straight ahead, in the direction in which we are supposed to walk. In order to live, we must be selective in our knowledge and our memories, and retain only that which may contribute to our action upon things.

Habitual perception is contrasted with philosophical perception: These are also Bergson's words, quoted by Hadot (1995, 253): "Might not the role of philosophy be to bring us to a more complete perception of reality, by means of a kind of displacement of our attention?" Hadot immediately

comments on this philosophical "displacement of attention" and emphasises the transformative power of philosophy as a way of life. It is important to note the relevance of these comments for what has been reported and described (in the previous section of this article) about the psychedelic experience:

> The "displacement of attention" of which Bergson speaks…is in fact a conversion: a radical rupture with regard to the state of unconsciousness in which man normally lives. The utilitarian perception we have of the world, in everyday life, in fact hides from us the world qua world. Aesthetic and philosophical perceptions of the world are only possible by means of a complete transformation of our relationship to the world: we have to perceive it *for itself*, and no longer *for ourselves* (Hadot 1995, 254; emphasis in original).

There is much that can be said about this perceptual shift in our relationship to the world. I have argued elsewhere (Pittaway 2017) that this shift is of crucial importance for the ecological plight of the planet and its consequences for human "civilisation": people seeing the world for itself rather than for themselves entails a dispensation notably different to the pragmatism and utilitarianism that reduces nature to little more than a "standing reserve" of resources for human consumption (Heidegger 1977, 4, 19–20). It is not my purpose here to pursue this theme. What I am emphasising here is that the philosophical transformation described by Bergson and Hadot is conspicuously similar to the transformation attained via the psychedelic experience, and via this emphasis I assert that the psychedelic experience is of relevance not only to philosophy as practised beyond the walls of a classroom, but to any context in which the theme of transformation of this sort is foregrounded. Considering some of the results of psychedelic studies compiled earlier, philosophical transformation is remarkably psychedelic, as evidenced by these sentiments from Lucretius when describing "how the world would look to us if we saw it for the first time", quoted by Hadot (1995, 258):

> First of all, the bright, clear colour of the sky, and all it holds within it, the stars that wander here and there, and the moon and the radiance of the sun with its brilliant light; all these, if now they had been seen for the first time by mortals, if, unexpectedly, they were in a moment placed before their eyes, what story could be told more marvellous than these things, or what that the nations would less dare to believe beforehand? Nothing, I believe; so worthy of wonder would this sight have been.

Furthermore, the transformation or displacement from habitual perception to philosophical perception is one that entails a transition towards a state of being characterised by freedom, peace, and serenity, which are surely desired outcomes of the process of healing:

> [I]t is quite apparent that the transformation of one's view of the world was intimately linked to exercises which involved concentrating one's mind on the present instant. In Stoicism as well as in Epicureanism, such exercises consisted in "separating oneself from the future and past", in order to "delimit the present instant". Such a technique gives the mind, freed from the burden and prejudices of the past, as well as from worry about the future, that inner detachment, freedom, and peace which are indispensable prerequisites for perceiving the world qua world. We have here, moreover, a kind of reciprocal causality: the mind acquires peace and serenity by becoming aware of its relationship with the world, to the extent that it re-places our existence within the cosmic perspective (Hadot 1995, 259).

What one is learning when undergoing this kind of transformation is not "book knowledge", but an intuitive form of healing knowledge that entails the fostering of cosmic consciousness (Hadot 1995, 266): by "'cosmic consciousness', we mean the consciousness that we are a part of the cosmos, and the consequent dilation of our self throughout the infinity of universal nature". This is the context in which ancient philosophical mysticism can best be understood. In an interview about his series of guided psychedelic experiences, Michael Pollan (in an interview with Ferris 2018) clarifies the meaning of the word "mystical". This suggests that cosmic consciousness (which I have associated with philosophical consciousness) is identical to "psychedelic consciousness": the psychedelic experience "feels to people like a mystical experience…It's very spiritual, this sense of

transcending this bag of bones we are and actually connect with larger entities". This would explain why, in Plato's *Phaedo*, the "mystics" are equated with the "true philosophers": "For 'many', as they say in the mysteries, 'are the thyrsus bearers, but few are the mystics', – meaning, as I interpret the words, the true philosophers" (1891, 1023); and again: "the founders of the mysteries would appear to have had a real meaning, and were not talking nonsense when they intimated…that he who arrives there after initiation and purification will dwell with the gods" (ibid.). The association occurs again, this time in Plato's *Phaedrus*, when reference is made to seeing "beauty shining in brightness, – we philosophers following in the train of Zeus, others in company with other gods; and then we beheld the beatific vision and were initiated into a mystery which may be truly called most blessed, celebrated by us in our state of innocence" (1891, 1093). The ingredients of philosophical consciousness, as sought by ancient philosophers, are therefore the following: seeing for the first time, or seeing with new eyes; transitioning from seeing the world habitually, or for ourselves, to seeing the world for itself; a "healing" characterised by perceptual freedom, peace and serenity; cosmic consciousness characterised by transcendence of human mortality and a feeling of being connected to a bigger unity; a mystical sense of being initiated into the mystery of existence. These ingredients are conspicuously similar to some of the characteristics of the psychedelic experience, as compiled in the previous section, which, as I will now show, should be no surprise, because ancient Greek culture held in the highest regard a series of initiation rituals (the "mysteries" referred to in both the *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus* quotes) that were either literally psychedelic or fully coterminous with the psychedelic experience.

The Eleusinian Mysteries were constituted by a set of initiatory rituals that occurred at Eleusis, situated slightly north of Athens and visited by "people of all classes, emperors and prostitutes, slaves and freemen" (Ruck 1978, 12). This event, which occurred annually for a period of time exceeding 2 000 years, was a celebration shrouded in secrecy, so much so that "no one, under pain of death, could reveal what happened within the sanctuary" at Eleusis (ibid.). Despite the secrecy surrounding the ritual, or perhaps due to the secrecy and the astounding reports by initiates that they underwent life-changing experiences there, various inquiries have been made into the goings-on at Eleusis. As I will show below, what has so far been explored about philosophical perception is perfectly situated in the context of a guided psychedelic experience at Eleusis that cultivated in a participant "the supreme experience in an initiate's life" (Ruck 1978, 19) – in other words, a peak experience, as was the case with the participants of controlled psychedelic studies.

At Eleusis, the preparation of the sacred *kykeon* was, according to Ruck (1978, 13, 17), the central event: "a special potion, as we know, was drunk prior to the visual experience". I have not been able to find an inquiry into the Eleusinian rituals that does not make reference to the drinking of the *kykeon* (sometimes referred to as a potion) as well as the reported effects of consuming it. The *kykeon* is everywhere accepted to be a "barley drink" (Rosen 1987, 416) infused with mint. In 1943, Albert Hoffman synthesised LSD from ergot fungi, which grows on grains such as barley. When asked by Wasson if the Ancient Greeks could have arrived at a psychedelic drink – i.e. their *kykeon* – from natural substances and extraction processes at their disposal, Hoffman (1978, 10–11) said that

> it is certainly not pulling a long bow to assume that the barley grown [at Eleusis] was host to an ergot containing, perhaps among others, the soluble hallucinogenic alkaloids. The famous Rarian plain was adjacent to Eleusis. Indeed this may well have led to the choice of Eleusis for Demeter's temple, and for the growth of the cluster of powerful myths surrounding them and Triptolemus that still exert their spell on us today.

Despite Hoffman's considered conclusion (1978, 8–11), one commentator, Ivan Valencic (1994), has pointed out that the various available descriptions of the effects of drinking the *kykeon* indicate that a far more powerful psychoactive substance was the key ingredient in the *kykeon* recipe. This view holds that considerably large doses of water-soluble ergot fungi would have been needed at exactly the right time of the year for the ceremony, and such reliable availability of large amounts via the ergot-extraction method is not guaranteed. However, rather than conclude that a lack of reliable availability of the ergot psychoactive proves that no psychoactive substance was used at

Eleusis, the commentator suggests, first, that the myth of Demeter – around which the ceremony is centred, and in which reference is made to the barley drink – was constructed to deliberately protect the secret of the *kykeon* by misleading "audiences" about the exact ingredients of the *kykeon*. The commentator goes so far as to suggest that a different, more reliable psychoactive substance was likely the culprit, with his guess being one of the psychoactive "magic" mushrooms such as one containing psilocybin, a molecule that certainly induces powerful psychedelic effects, as already seen in the extracts from contemporary psychedelic studies. The point here is not to identify which psychoactive substance was used, but rather to emphasise the insistence of researchers that some kind of powerful psychoactive was used.

Rosen follows the philology of the word *kykeon* via an examination of a fragment of a poem by Hipponax. He identifies (1987, 15) first its potential literal meaning in the poem: "a remedy against the hunger arriving from…poverty", and quickly points out that the speaker of the poem requires of the addressee barley for his drink. Rosen immediately suggests that the more appropriate meaning of the word is "drug": "the *kykeon* was also known in antiquity for its medicinal qualities, making it all the more appropriate that it be referred to as…a drug in the literal sense" (ibid.). Rosen (1987, 422–423) also focuses briefly on the work of C. Watkins to point out that the Homeric references to *kykeon*

> reflect an inherited pre-Greek religious ritual. [Watkins] points out the striking formulaic and thematic correspondences between these Homeric passages and the references in the *Rig-Veda* to the ritual drinking of soma, which also contains barley. Indeed the central characteristic of both potions, as Watkins demonstrates, is that they were each originally psychotropic.

Rosen's inquiry into the issue is conveniently succinct. A slightly longer philological approach is taken by Ruck (1978, 13–17), not into the Hipponax source, but directly into the Demeter myth pivotal to the Eleusinian Mysteries. Ruck's textual analysis is too long to summarise here, but his conclusion – which is supported in detail in his analysis – is that the "myths of Demeter and Persephone and all their company fit our explanation in every respect. Nothing in any of them is incompatible with our thesis". The "explanation" Ruck is referring to is about the effects of the Eleusinian ceremony, and the "thesis" he mentions is that the Eleusinian initiates underwent a literal psychedelic experience. Here is an example of why Ruck makes such a conclusion: the central myth associated with the Eleusinian mystery is the myth of the abduction of the goddess Persephone, and her abduction is symbolic: "The marital abduction or seizure of maidens while gathering flowers is…a common theme in Greek myths and Plato records a rationalized version of such stories in which the companion of the seized maiden is named Pharmaceia or, as the name, means, the 'use of drugs'" (1978, 13). Ruck adds, "[t]he particular myth that Plato is rationalizing is in fact one that traced the descent of the priesthood at Eleusis. There can be no doubt that Persephone's abduction was a drug-induced seizure".

For anyone who has had a strong psychedelic experience, it is perhaps the case that identifying the exact psychoactive substance used at Eleusis is less important in supporting the explanation and thesis (ibid.) than is the recognition that the reported effects of the Eleusinian experience are coterminous with the psychedelic experience. After conducting his textual research into the Mysteries, Ruck (1978, 13) summarises the effects as follows:

> There were physical symptoms, moreover, that accompanied the vision: fear and a trembling in the limbs, vertigo, nausea, and a cold sweat. Then there came the vision, a sight amidst an aura of brilliant light that suddenly flickered through the darkened chamber. Eyes had never before seen the like, and…the experience itself was in-communicable, for there are no words adequate to the task. Even a poet could only say that he had seen the beginning and the end of life and known that they were one, something given by god. The division between earth and sky melted into a pillar of light.

To see "the beginning and end of life" and to "know that they are one" surely casts light on the epiphanies had by terminal cancer patients in the relevant psychedelic studies. Furthermore, the

themes of "eyes never before seeing the like" and "transformed visions" arose when identifying aspects of philosophical perception, and they are often present in reports of the psychedelic experience. On this matter, Wasson (1978, 5), referring to the transformation facilitated by a psychedelic experience, seems to be quoting Seneca (and he also indirectly incorporates the concept of habitual perception):

> This newness of everything – it is as though the world had just dawned – overwhelms you and melts you with its beauty. Not unnaturally, what is happening to you seems to you freighted with significance, beside which the humdrum events of everyday are trivial. All these things you see with an immediacy of vision that leads you to say to yourself, "Now I am *seeing for the first time*, seeing direct, without the intervention of mortal eyes" (emphasis added).

In keeping with these themes, Wasson (1978, 4) quotes Aristides the Rhetor to elaborate further on the effects: what the initiate experienced was "new, astonishing, inaccessible to rational cognition". Eleusis, says Aristides,

> is a shrine common to the whole earth, and of all the divine things that exist among men, it is both the most awesome and the most luminous. At what place in the world have more miraculous tidings been sung, and where have the dromena called forth greater emotion, where has there been greater rivalry between seeing and hearing?

The reference to a "rivalry between seeing and hearing" – synaesthesia – makes best sense if placed in the context of the effects of the psychedelic experience, for it is the case that under the influence of psychedelics, auditory stimuli often manifest in a visual manner, and vice versa. Wasson, who partook in Mesoamerican mushroom rites, puts it as follows: "For the sights that one sees assume rhythmical contours, and the singing of the shaman seems to take on visible and colorful shapes" (1978, 4). Indeed, it was directly after he had partaken in the rites that Wasson made the link: "That there might be a common denominator between the Mexican mushroom Mystery and the Mystery of Eleusis had struck me at once. They both aroused an overwhelming sense of awe, of wonder" (ibid.). It is crucial to re-acknowledge at this point that the Eleusinian Mysteries' ceremonies and rituals were conducted annually for the entire history of ancient Greece, and that these ceremonies and rituals inspired in initiates "an overwhelming sense of awe, of wonder" (ibid.). This is what ancient philosophers reported accompanying the philosophical perception that resulted in practising philosophy as a way of life. It would be untenable to suggest that a ritual renowned throughout the ancient world would not have been influential in other cultural pursuits, such as philosophical endeavours. It is more viable to suggest that the Eleusinian Mysteries, which clearly had psychedelic components, influenced ancient philosophical endeavours, or that there was a mutual reciprocation between the two pursuits.

Ruck (1978, 19) provides further important commentary and description on the experience at Eleusis:

> The ancient testimony about Eleusis is unanimous and unambiguous. Eleusis was the supreme experience in an initiate's life. It was both physical and mystical: trembling, vertigo, cold sweat, and then a sight that made all previous seeing seem like blindness, a sense of awe and wonder at a brilliance that caused a profound silence since what had just been seen and felt could never be communicated: words are unequal to the task. Those symptoms are unmistakably the experience induced by an hallucinogen.

The word "hallucinogen" and "psychedelic" are, for the purposes of this article, synonymous, as are the words "psychoactive" or "entheogen". They are words that more often than not since the 1970s are used as pejoratives, the year when the (failed) war on drugs was legislated in the USA (after the Controlled Substances Act of 1970 was passed by the Nixon administration). It is important to note that beyond the confines of the failed war on drugs, the experience that is facilitated by the use of a psychedelic or hallucinogen is often considered to be "the culminating experience of a lifetime" (Ruck 1978, 12), or, as has just been seen via Ruck's commentary, "the supreme experience in an

initiate's life". Accepting the hypothesis that such a substance was used in the ceremony at Eleusis allows one to make sense of statements such as the following one made by Rosen (1987, 423–424): "Spiritual and physical happiness is…the promise of Eleusinian initiation…Our sources stress not only that the initiate will be happy in the afterworld, but that he will also be happy and prosperous in this life". It is precisely the case that terminal cancer patients are "happier in this life", as well as more prepared for their "journey into the afterworld", after psychedelic therapy. In general, patients and initiates alike have mystical experiences, are struck by awe and wonder, feel as though they are part of a bigger and more meaningful whole, re-evaluate how they comprehend life and death, see visions and patterns and details they have never seen before, and so on. Ancient philosophers, as has been seen already, spoke similarly of the sights of wondrous things, of feeling connected to a greater whole, and so on. The ancient philosophical experience of the "dilation of our self throughout the infinity of universal nature" (Hadot 1995, 266) is particularly telling, because it matches a psychedelic experience described by Michael Pollan (Ferris 2018). Pollan describes the psychedelic experience as entailing a process of ego-dissolution, which seems like a less poetic way of saying the "dilation of our self". He comments that the experience of ego dissolution "feels to people like a mystical experience", and adds that ego dissolution "is a kind of rehearsal for death", which provides insight into why the Eleusinian experience prepared initiates for the afterlife, and why the guided psychedelic experience eases anxiety in cancer patients regarding their imminent deaths.[2] Perhaps this "mystical" context explains why Thomas Taylor, in his research into the Eleusinian Mysteries in 1891, records the following important comparison. He writes (1891, 166), "Theon of Smyrna, in Mathematica,…thus elegantly compares philosophy to these mystic rites": "philosophy may be called the initiation into true sacred ceremonies, and the instruction in genuine Mysteries". Philosophy is again associated with the Mysteries when he articulates the following analogy:

> Just as persons who are being initiated into the Mysteries throng together at the outset amid tumult and shouting, and jostle against one another, but when the holy rites are being performed and disclosed the people are immediately attentive in awe and silence, so too at the beginning of philosophy: about its portals also you will see great tumult and talking and boldness, as some boorishly and violently try to jostle their way towards the repute it bestows; but he who has succeeded in getting inside, and has seen a great light, as though a shrine were opened, adopts another bearing of silence and amazement, and "humble and orderly attends upon" reason as upon a god.

By emphasising the above links between philosophical consciousness and psychedelic consciousness, I am not suggesting that the direction taken by philosophy as a discipline since the time of the ancient philosophers – almost exclusively a direction away from the altered states of consciousness central to the older philosophical endeavour at Eleusis – is a "good" or "bad" direction. The process of change is universal, and philosophy as a discipline obviously cannot be exempt from this law. What I am suggesting, very specifically, is that the philosopher must acknowledge in the history of one's discipline the high esteem – rather, the *highest* esteem – placed on the "initiatory" experience facilitated at Eleusis, an experience that some researchers and authors acknowledge and argue to be one induced by psychedelics and which the Ancients equated with philosophy. A consequence of this acknowledgement is, at very least, that a philosopher cannot simply dismiss this type of experience without doing an injustice to the history of the discipline in which they participate – philosophers

2 In *Anti-Oedipus* (1983, 131–132), Deleuze and Guattari quote Laing's observations, that the so-called "mad person", in undergoing a so-called breakdown, might instead be referred to as undergoing a breakthrough. The words and concepts used to describe the process of potential breakthrough are "ego-less" and "transcendental experiences", the first of which exactly matches Pollan's description, while the second is frequently encountered in the context of the psychedelic experience. The following part of Laing's observations is very telling, for it offers insight not only into so-called madness but also into the suffering that a "breakthrough" experience (which can be facilitated by psychedelics) can help alleviate:

> Our sanity is not "true" sanity. Their madness is not "true" madness. The madness of our patients is an artifact of the destruction wreaked on them by us and by them on themselves. Let no one suppose that we meet "true" madness any more than that we are truly sane. The madness that we encounter in "patients" is a gross travesty, a mockery, a grotesque caricature of what the natural healing of that estranged integration we call sanity might be. True sanity entails in one way or another the dissolution of the normal ego".

must take the experience seriously. And perhaps it is not only philosophers who should take the experience seriously, but also all people who see the influence that the (psychedelic) ancient Greek culture has had for the rest of humanity's history. Ancient Greek culture and philosophy

> had a huge influence on the world. Greece is the birthplace of democracy and Western culture. In so many fields of human endeavour – government, philosophy, science, mythology, religion, and all the arts – the accomplishments and contributions of Greece have at times been equalled but have never been surpassed (McGinnis 2004, 7).

This immense productivity emanated from a culture that highly venerated experiences that were either literally psychedelic, or at very least, fully coterminous with the psychedelic experience, and it was also a culture that practised philosophy as a way of life accompanied by philosophical perception, a type of perception that shares important features with psychedelic perception.

Southern African indigenous cultural use of psychoactive plants

The researcher J. F. Sobiecki, in an article titled "A review of plants used in divination in southern Africa and their psychoactive effects", found that of "85 species of plants that are used for divination by southern Bantu-speaking people…39 species (45%) have other reported psychoactive uses, and a number have established hallucinogenic activity" (2008, 333). He states that the "findings indicate that psychoactive plants have an important role in traditional healing practices in southern Africa" (ibid.). Sobiecki quotes (ibid.) the diviner Mahube with words that immediately foreground the similarity of Mahube's experience to the experiences so far associated with psychedelic perception: "I eat medicines that work in my body like matches to dry wood. I do not open my eyes. It is not with my eyes that I see. My ancestors see for me. I see in a dream". Sobiecki's article is extremely well researched and referenced; here is an extract (2008, 335) that is typical of the thoroughness of his research and also indicative of the overwhelming evidence provided for the claim that psychoactive plants are widely used in indigenous southern African cultural practice:

> Some interesting terms for psychoactive plants exist, including *bhayiskhobho* (bioscope (cinema) in Zulu), otherwise known as the "mirror" or "TV", which refers to the effects of hallucinogenic plants such as the toxic Boophone disticha (L.f.) Herb. (see Hall 1994, 54). Another Zulu term, *bonisele*, describes several plant species that are used by initiate diviners to elicit divinatory powers and induce dreams of the ancestral spirits. The term is derived from the verb *bona*, and means "to see on my behalf" (L.C. Posthumus pers. comm.) or "to show me the light" (L. Maponya pers. comm.). The descriptions of the effects of *bonisele* plants on the initiate diviners are analogous with metaphysical "seeing", transcendental enlightenment and revelation. An example of one such plant is Chamaecrista mimosoides (L.) Greene. Descriptive phrases for such plants also include "magical plants" and "plants that arouse the spirits".

In another article titled "Psychoactive Ubulawu Spiritual Medicines and Healing Dynamics in the Initiation Process of Southern Bantu Diviners", Sobiecki reports (2012, 216) his findings as follows:

> Findings reveal that there is widespread reliance on *ubulawu* as psychoactive spiritual medicines by the indigenous people of southern Africa to communicate with their ancestral spirits – so as to bring luck, and to treat mental disturbances. In the case of the Southern Bantu diviners, *ubulawu* used in a ritual initiation process acts as a mnemonic aid and medicine to familiarize the initiates with enhanced states of awareness and related psychospiritual phenomena such as enhanced intuition and dreams of the ancestral spirits, who teach the initiates how to find and use medicinal plants. The progression of the latter phenomena indicates the steady success of the initiates' own healing integration.

Quite simply, in southern African indigenous cultural practice, psychoactive plants play an important role, and they induce in the "user" a state of consciousness that has at least some similarities to the psychedelic experience referred to in earlier parts of this paper, and to the philosophical consciousness accompanying philosophy as a way of life as practised by ancient philosophers. I

share Sobiecki's view (2012, 219) that the psychedelic effects of the psychoactive plants used in southern African indigenous cultures are generally less intense than in the cases of rituals elsewhere in the world where psychedelic substances are used, for example in the case of the Amazonian shamanistic use of ayahuasca. Sobiecki does suggest (ibid.), however, that the "purpose and results of the South American and South African plant use" is the same, i.e. "to learn healing knowledge". This phrase, *to learn healing knowledge*, is a fitting catchphrase summarising the purpose of psychedelic use in both the Eleusinian Mystery ritual and the contemporary clinical applications of psychedelic therapies; it is also a fitting phrase for at least some aspects of the transformation brought about by philosophical perception in the context of philosophy as a way of life.

Conclusion

From what has been presented in this paper on the new science of psychedelics, the psychedelic origins of philosophy and the concomitance of philosophical perception and psychedelic perception, and the psychedelic component of southern African indigenous psychoactive plant use, it is clear that the psychedelic experience is relevant to all disciplines. Psychedelics have the potential to play an important role in fostering the deeply transformative "philosophical learning" that is the condition for genuine, positive social change considering that in all three disciplines, i.e. science, philosophy, and indigenous cultural plant use, healing knowledge was acquired via the psychedelic experience. A society constituted by people who have learned healing knowledge is surely a qualitatively "better" society than one constituted by individuals operating according to the exclusively pragmatic imperatives of habitual perception. This makes the topic of psychedelics an immanently worthy subject of philosophical reflection, and opportunities for collaboration may be available if philosophers, scientists, and indigenous cultural plant healers focus on the psychedelic commonalities between their disciplines. A common ground spanning across such a large expanse of time (i.e. from Ancient Greece and age-old indigenous contexts through to medical and clinical contexts of the twenty-first century) and across such broad contexts (i.e. ancient philosophy, philosophy as a practice, philosophy as a transformational process, indigenous cultural practices, and contemporary clinical research), is an invaluable tool for cohesion across contexts. Fortunately, the value of this truly transformative psychedelic experience has recently been acknowledged via studies such as the ones referred to in this article – an aura of reputability is beginning to accompany inquiries into the broad topic of psychedelics. Philosophy, if it is to reconnect with the ancient practices from which it was birthed, and if it is not to be confined to "discourse about philosophy", can also pursue the opportunity to focus on this arena of transformative potential, and as a consequence partake in the exploration of altered states of consciousness that are relevant across cultures, disciplines and contexts. Indeed, there is a danger in ignoring a topic like psychedelic studies, as pointed out by Rudgley (quoted in Roberts 2006, 188), who also points out some opportunities that can be gained from exploring altered states of consciousness like the one induced by psychedelics. Rudgley's comments were made to motivate anthropological inquiry into altered states of consciousness, but the comments are relevant to any discipline:

> Bearing in mind that humans have an innate need to experience altered states of consciousness, to ignore or repress our own natures in this way is to neglect our own capacities. What anthropology can do, by describing other cultures in which scientific and poetic approaches to truth are part of a holistic vision, is to remind us of the lack of harmony in the elements of our own second nature. It can indicate ways in which we may reach a better understanding of the importance of altered states of consciousness in both our collective and our personal lives.

It is with these thoughts in mind that I conclude with the following sentiments of Ruck (1978, 17) that go some distance in encouraging collaboration in this important field of academic and experiential research: "Now…those of us who have experienced the superior hallucinogens may join the fellowship of the ancient initiates in a lasting bond of friendship, a friendship born of a shared experience of a reality deeper far than we had known before".

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