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Psychedelic Experience



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Chapter 1

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 *psyche* (mind/soul) and *delos* (to make clear/visible) and means *mind-revealing*. Accordingly, a psychedelic experience is a *mind-revealing experience*. It is an experience in which hidden parts 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 often comes along with that. Because of this connection, the term ‘psychedelic’ has become synony-

mous 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 profound importance 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 many 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 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, *Fourth Set of Replies*.¹

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 popular opinion, is that there are in fact parts of our minds that exist outside of our awareness, but they are 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 seem nonsensical: there is nothing inside our minds that's genuinely hidden.

Modern cognitive psychology 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 we can be influenced to make decisions without

¹Translation by [Cottingham 1985](#), p. 171. It should be noted that although this is a view often attributed to Descartes (and called "the Cartesian catastrophe"), 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.

us ever being conscious of the influence (Nisbett and Wilson 1977). You don't need cognitive psychology, 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. As we'll see later in the book, there are many more examples, and different *kinds* of examples, of this phenomenon.

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:

"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 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 are 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 we could all really 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 can we 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 at least 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. However, I'll also argue that such drug-induced experiences are often defective 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, are often misleading.

That raises another big question: are there *other* ways of having psychedelic experiences? And is there a way to have a psychedelic experience that is clearer and less misleading than the drug-induced ones? I'll argue that there are, and, in particular, that *the practice of meditation* tends to induce psychedelic experiences that lack some of the defects that tend to come with the drug-induced ones.² Although the acts of consuming a psychedelic and meditating can look quite different, many have noticed that they also have some strong similarities in their effects (Badiner et al. 2015, Milliere et al. 2018). A rough conclusion of the book will be that psychedelic-induced psychedelic experiences tend to be fast, messy, and temporary, while meditation-induced psychedelic experiences 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 (at least not immediately). Nor does it follow that practicing meditation is uniformly superior to consuming psychedelics. Both methods have their advantages and disadvantages and, when used appropriately, both are important tools to have available in our 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 eating strange substances. I call such psychedelic 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 *only after* you have stopped trying to reach for it—it suddenly

²As 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.

pops into your awareness. That's a spontaneous psychedelic experience: the word was hidden, and then it is suddenly revealed to you—and you didn't do anything weird. There are many other kinds of spontaneous psychedelic experiences, including some epiphanies, some creative insights, overcoming writer's block, when we laugh at some jokes, when we first have the insight of our own mortality, and whenever we become aware of it again. We can come up with 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, and it may seem like I am *redefining* what a psychedelic experience is. 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 are they so effective in assisting psychotherapy? Why do people report having such profound and life-changing experiences from them? Why are they illegal in most countries? Why are they commonly perceived to be so dangerous? And so on. Surely we should refer to only the psychedelic-induced experiences as being psychedelic—so the objection goes. My reply is that psychedelic drugs are a big deal because they tend to induce experiences that are *extremely* psychedelic and that are *way more* psychedelic than our spontaneous ones 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 is between billionaires and regular people—but it is still just a difference in degree.

This reply requires a conceptualisation of psychedelic experience that allows for experiences to vary in the *degree* to which they are psychedelic. Indeed, such a conceptualisation is required by one of the basic facts we know about psychedelics: larger doses of them tend to result in stronger psychedelic experiences. What does it mean for a psychedelic experience to be stronger than another? The beginning of an answer is that the experience is *more psychedelic*. There's a natural tendency to understand this answer as entailing that the experience is *weirder* or *more mind-bending*, but if we stick to our understanding of 'psychedelic' in terms of mind-revelation, then it must mean that the experience is *more mind-revealing*. In other words, the experience is more revealing of the mind. But what does *that* mean? What makes an 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 not unidimensional; instead, they are multidimensional. 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 created 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 focused 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 *psyche* (mind/soul) and *cryptos* (to conceal/hide). As in the case of psychedelic experiences, we regularly have psychecryptic experiences but often don't recognise 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 gets you to buy something you didn'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. Certain substances, such as alcohol, may also cause psychecryptic experiences—which is why it's also a bad idea to make big decisions while inebriated. Although we never use the terms 'psychecryptic' or 'mind-concealing' to describe these sorts of mental states, it's clear that we can recognise them as such. In some cases, we even label them in a way that reflects this idea. Take for example, the notion of *brain fog*, which we all experience 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). An experience of brain fog 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 some-

thing 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 both psychedelic and psychecryptic: as the flashlight moves, some parts of the closet are revealed and other parts are concealed (receding 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 multi-tasking 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.³

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.⁴ 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 useful here. The light of the flashlight is your attention and what you can see is your awareness. Roughly speaking, the effect of a psychedelic is to temporarily increase the amount of light shining from the flash-

³There is a subtle issue here that will eventually need to be addressed. Normally, the way we speak of being aware of something in the external world (an apple, for example) is that we are aware of that thing, and not of our mental representation of it (our visual image of the apple, for example). Moving our attention around, then, might be better said to be *world-revealing/concealing* rather than *mind-revealing/concealing*. In chapter 4, 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.

⁴This is not to imply that these are the *only* effects of psychedelics and meditation.

light.⁵ Because of the increase in the amount of light, you can now see more of the closet than you otherwise would. However—continuing the metaphor—most people are not very good at using a flashlight: it's difficult to hold it still or to move it around effectively and deliberately. Practicing 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. Not only does it improve your ability to use the flashlight, it also tidies your closet, so there are fewer things obscuring your view of what's important.

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 the things in your closet if you shine the flashlight in your eyes or if you stumble around and create an even greater mess.⁶ 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 people often say that psychedelics and meditation "expand awareness" or "expand consciousness". While these concepts might appear unscientific (or may 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.

I hope to now 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 *drugs*. But, as I think is clear by now, the book's central focus is about a certain kind of *experience*—namely, psychedelic experience. To some readers, it may seem that I am changing the definition of 'psychedelic experience', but 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 phenomena of interest—that is, the experiences that are induced by psychedelics. However, 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: the purpose of becoming wise. Seeking wisdom is the fundamental goal of philosophy, and it is for achieving this

⁵As we will see in chapter 6, the truth is more complicated than this, but this metaphor is good enough for now.

⁶The analogy also over-emphasises the amplificatory aspect to attention. As is now well known, attention also has an inhibitory aspect to it.

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 experience is a valuable tool for becoming wise. For example, according to Socrates, wisdom involves being aware of the limits of one's knowledge, and many of us fail to be wise in this respect because we are often unaware of what we do not know. Actually, the problem we suffer from tends to be worse than that: what we do not know is often *hidden* from us by things that we also cannot see. And so to become wise in this sense involves winning a particularly difficult internal struggle over that which obscures our ignorance. I will argue that psychedelic experience can help 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 knowing the more universal and timeless facts of reality. This is the kind of knowledge that we tend to associate with our best scientists, poets, philosophers, musicians, religious leaders, artists, sages, mystics, and so on. Psychedelic experiences can also help us become wise in this respect. For example, I will argue that psychedelic experiences can help us be more creative, and by doing so, it can help us become better at any creative endeavour that we apply ourselves to. Also, to the extent that some of these facts of reality involve our minds, psychedelic experiences can help with knowing those too. Many philosophers and mystics, for instance, have long thought that important philosophical and spiritual facts can be discovered through introspection and meditation. For example, Hume concluded that there is no such thing as a self based on his own introspections, and common interpretations of early Buddhist texts say that the Buddha reached the same insight via meditation. Since it is difficult to verify the truth of such claims, we are not in a position to say that psychedelic experience helps us *know* them. However, I will argue it at least helps us to *understand* such claims, which can be seemingly paradoxical or nonsensical. In this way, psychedelic experience can help us think about these claims and how they might be coherently embedded in our larger belief systems. Having this kind of understanding contributes to one's wisdom in this sense of knowing the more universal and timeless facts of reality.

Knowing these facts 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 his arguments for this was that some philosophers of his time didn't seem very 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. This 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 recognise that 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 experience can help us become more aware of the undue influences on our decisions and, consequently, help us to manage or even alter them for the betterment of our decision making.⁷

Perhaps the ultimate notion of wisdom is that which is pointed to by the Delphic maxim, *know thyself*, and which we also find in the Eastern philosophies, such as in the *Dao De Ching*, which elevates it to the level of enlightenment: *he who knows others is wise, he who knows himself is enlightened*. Indeed, I think a case can be made that the Socratic and Aristotelian conceptions of wisdom, along with others, 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. And, according to common interpretations of Buddhist texts, knowing one's true self-nature is enlightenment.⁸ And knowing how to make good decisions must involve knowing what is good for oneself and knowing one's decision-making dispositions. It would seem, therefore, that all roads of wisdom lead to, or *through*, the self. As we'll see, psychedelic experience is not only beneficial for seeking this ultimate form of wisdom, it may even be the

⁷And, 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 other, and thus they may be both beneficial and harmful to decision making.

⁸What that true self-nature is, though, a matter of debate, with a common belief being that there is no self. However, it is important to be aware that Buddhists are not universally agreed on this point. Some believe that the idea that there is no self (*anattā*) should not be treated as a metaphysical doctrine, but instead engaged with as a practical method for discovering some truth about the self that leads to, or corresponds to, enlightenment (Albahari 2002).

only way to attain it.

1.2 Book outline

Now that you have a general understanding of the overall mission of the book, let's take a closer look at its structure. I'll start with a general overview of the book's structure and then I will explain how the book will proceed chapter-by-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 it is not easy. The first is that the general topic is emotionally charged and has potentially huge social and political implications. Such topics often invite passionate, but non-rigorous 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 these experiences, and the little bit of knowledge that we do have can fool us into thinking we have more knowledge 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 5-9, I will point this new philosophical machinery at the scientific literature, so that we can start to make sense of actual psychedelic experiences. My primary focus will be 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 five chapters is that they constitute an informal assessment of the likelihoods of various hypotheses that we may want to consider. For example, there is 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: there is 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 10-11, I will come back to issues that are more philosophical. 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 five chapters are successful—have received indirect empirical support from empirical research. So, although the issues of these two 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 study these topics that 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 they actually produce mind-revealing experiences?⁹ 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

⁹Although it often isn't clear in the scientific literature, it is a *hypothesis* that so-called psychedelic drugs produce psychedelic experiences. One notable exception to this lack of clarity is [Carhart-Harris 2018](#), p. 170, who clearly recognises this point and also the fact that it often isn't recognised.

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're 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 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 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, whereby '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 this way makes it clear that meditation may tend to produce psychedelic experiences that are different from those that tend to be produced by psychedelics. 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 start examining the empirical evidence concerning psychedelic experience. 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*. 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). Given this close connection between awarenesses 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 resource allocation. We can see, then, how meditation expands awareness and thus reveals the mind: it helps you allocate attentional resource to things in the mind that don't normally receive that resource, making it more likely that they appear in awareness. Whereas meditation improves the control over the allocation of one's attentional resource, I'll argue that the effect of psychedelics is to give us *more* attentional resource that can be allocated. Roughly speaking, this additional resource then has to go somewhere, and whatever parts of the mind it lands on, it makes them more likely to appear in awareness—or appear more vividly in awareness. I will argue that this basic idea help us understand the various psychological and phenomenological effects of psychedelics. The result of this chapter is a unified theory of how psychedelics and meditation can reveal the mind: they do so by changing how attentional resource is allocated.

In chapter 6, we will then consider what I think is the simplest kind of psychedelic experience: when a long-lost memory suddenly floods one's conscious awareness. We are all familiar with such experiences because they can be triggered by the most mundane events, such as when we happen to come across an aroma 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—since they can happen without particular interventions, such as the use 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 the empirical phenomenon of psychedelic experience.

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 get an elegant connection between psychedelic experience and mindfulness. Very briefly and roughly speaking, a psychedelic experience is like suddenly finding your keys, 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* appear to have a tendency to induce long-lasting improvements to 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. Fascinatingly, there is a burgeoning 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 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

do the *hallucinations* that psychedelics are renowned for producing count as being mind-revealing? As I mentioned, some of the hallucinations may simply be imperfections, and so although they themselves may not be mind-revealing, there nevertheless may 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 hallucination: (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 of 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 psychedelics increase our effective creativity by bringing more of this creativity into our conscious experience. I also argue that meditation has a similar effect, and I 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 modern cognitive psychology.

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 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 as a *peak* or *maximally* psychedelic experience. 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 maximises 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 experience is a kind of *singularity* for analytic philosophy (and any downstream field of investigation). The best we can do is 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 experience is maximally psychedelic—or even if it is psychedelic to *any* degree—we will be able to develop an understanding of it 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 would appear that meditation may be more conducive to wisdom than psychedelics are. At any rate, I will unpack in more detail how psychedelic experience, regardless of how it is brought about, can help us to become wiser.

Finally, in chapter 12, I'll 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 and slowly. In the next chapter, we'll make the first step towards our central question: what is a 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.