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Aldous Huxley's Doors of Perception

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Aldous Huxley's personal account of his experience taking mescaline in The Doors of Perception (1954) has influenced popular understandings of the effects of psychedelic drugs and encouraged many personal experiences with these drugs. Huxley encouraged the psychiatrist Humphry Osmond to coin the term 'psychedelic'. He knew many of the leading figures in early psychedelic research and advocated for the use of psychedelics to enlighten spiritually the intellectual elite. We provide background on who Huxley was, how his mescaline experience came about and the key messages of his essay. We also discuss the impact of Huxley's essay and advocacy on early psychedelic research.

Introduction

In May 1953, the English novelist, essayist and intellectual celebrity, Aldous Huxley took mescaline under the supervision of the British psychiatrist Humphry Osmond (who supplied the drug). Huxley wrote an account of his experience in *The Doors of Perception* [1] in which he made a case for using psychedelic drugs for spiritual enlightenment but stopped short of fully endorsing such use [2,3,4]. His account influenced the "set and setting" for many persons who were inspired by the essay to try LSD and other psychedelic drugs in the 1960s and early 1970s [4,5,6].

Aldous Huxley was a member of the English intellectual elite, an "intellectual celebrity of the first order" [6], a grandson of T.H Huxley, Darwin's bulldog, and the son of Leonard Huxley and Julia Arnold, the niece of Matthew Arnold. His older brother, Julian was an influential evolutionary biologist and eugenicist, and his half-brother, Andrew Huxley, was a Nobel Laureate in medicine in

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1963. He had a challenging early life: his mother died of cancer when he was 14 and his brother Trevenen hanged himself when Aldous was 20 [7].

Aldous Huxley initially wished to study medicine but chose a literary career instead because of poor eyesight. He remained deeply interested in science. He first published novels in the 1920s and 1930s but the book [8] that made his international reputation was Brave New World (1932), a dystopian fantasy of a future society in which humans were mass produced by artificial breeding to fill defined niches in a social caste system (alphas, betas and gammas). Pavlovian conditioning ensured that individuals behaved in the ways desired by those who ran the society and a drug, soma, was used to pacify any unruly members of the lower castes. His depiction of drug use as form of social control differed markedly from the more favourable view provided in The Doors of Perception and his last book [9], Island (1962).

While at Oxford University, Huxley read widely in the literature on mysticism. After graduating he explored the occultism of Aleister Crowley, Vedantism, scientology, and Buddhism. He moved to Los Angeles in 1937 to work as a writer in the film industry, developed friendships with Krishnamurti, and Prabhavananda, and explored his longstanding interest in Spiritualism, mesmerism, and parapsychological research. In 1945 Huxley attempted to provide a synthesis of the beliefs shared by all religious traditions in his Perennial Philosophy [10]:

> … the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being.

Why did Huxley try mescaline?

Mescaline was the first plant-based psychedelic drug identified and studied by European pharmacologists. Heffter extracted it from the peyote cactus in 1897 [3] and Spath synthesized it in 1919 [3]. Havelock Ellis, Emile Kraepelin, and Weir Mitchell published accounts of their experiences [3].

Huxley was widely read in the 19th century literature on hashish. He knew of Jacques-Joseph Moreau's membership in the Club des Hashischins in Paris and Aleister Crowley's later experimentation with mescaline [11]. In the early1950s, he read a paper by two psychiatrists, Humphry Osmond and John Smythies, in which they argued that the mescaline experience reproduced the symptoms of schizophrenia psychoses [3,5,12,13] and that the cause of schizophrenia may be a hallucinogenic derivative of adrenalin [2,14].

In March 1953, Aldous Huxley sent an "appreciative note" to Humphry Osmond and included a copy of his novel, The Devils of Loudon (1952) [15]. Osmond responded promptly and later accepted an invitation to stay with Huxley when he came to Los Angeles for a psychiatric conference. He also

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agreed to give Huxley mescaline and he supervised the session, in a white coat, having taken the precaution to ensure that Huxley had medications such as chlorpromazine on hand to abort a 'bad trip' [7].

Huxley's mescaline experience

Huxley hoped that mescaline would produce a mystical experience, like that described by the English mystic William Blake who provided a motto for the essay: "If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything will appear to man as it is, infinite" [1]:

> From what I had read of the mescalin [sic] experience I was convinced in advance that the drug would admit me, at least for a few hours, into the kind of inner world described by Blake … But what I had expected did not happen … no visions of many-coloured geometries, of animated architecture, rich with gems and fabulously lovely" (p15)
>
> The change …in the world was in no sense revolutionary … I became aware of a low dance of golden lights … [and] sumptuous red surfaces swelling and expanding from bright nodes of energy that vibrated with a continuously changing, patterned life (p16)
>
> I was seeing what Adam had seen in the morning of creation – the miracle, moment by moment, of naked existence" (p17)

Huxley believed that mescaline bypassed the "cerebral reducing valve" that enabled human beings to function in everyday life. This expectation preceded his mescaline experience, as he expressed in a letter [16, p. 5] to Osmond on 10 April 1953:

> It looks as though the most satisfactory working hypothesis about the human mind must follow, to some extent, the Bergsonian model, in which the brain with its associated normal self, acts as a utilitarian device for limiting, and making selections from, the enormous possible world of consciousness, and for canalizing experience into biologically profitable channels.

Huxley argued that mescaline provided a less harmful way than alcohol and tobacco to have "chemical vacations from intolerable self-hood and repulsive surroundings" [1, p. 53]. It could "relieve and console our suffering species without doing more harm in the long run than it does good in the short" [1, p. 53]. It was "potent in minute doses and synthesizable", "less toxic than opium and cocaine", had "fewer undesirable social consequences than alcohol or barbiturates" and was "less injurious to the lungs than tobacco". It produced "changes in consciousness more interesting, more intrinsically valuable than mere sedation, or dreaminess, delusions of omnipotence or release from inhibition" and its long history of indigenous use showed that it was "completely innocuous" [1, p. 53].

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Huxley later wrote a companion essay, Heaven and Hell, in which he acknowledged that psychedelic experiences were not always pleasant [17, p. 109]:

> "Visionary experience is not always blissful. It is sometimes terrible. There is hell as well as heaven … The user of a psychedelic drug, in particular, may experience either state, depending on the prior condition of his psyche … The torments of Dante's inferno are experienced by schizophrenics and persons who take mescaline and LSD under unfavourable conditions … Fear and anger bar the way to heavenly Other World and plunge the mescaline taker into hell".

In The Doors of Perception he was careful not "to equate what happens under the influence of mescalin or of any other drug … with the realization of the end and ultimate purpose of human life" [1]. Nonetheless some of his critics assumed him to be saying exactly this. A Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics at Oxford, Zaehner [18], for example, argued that Huxley's essay struck "at the roots of all religion that makes any claim to be taken seriously". Zaehner took mescaline and described his experience as "transcendence into a world of farcical meaninglessness" and mocked Huxley's report of disappointment at experiencing a "banal" vision [19].

In Heaven and Hell Huxley defended the mystical experiences induced by drugs [20]:

> "… an experience which is chemically conditioned cannot be an experience of the divine. But in one way or another, all our experiences are chemically conditioned, and if we imagine that some of them are purely 'spiritual', purely 'intellectual', purely 'aesthetic', it is merely because we have never troubled to investigate the internal chemical environment at the moment of their occurrence".

According to his second wife, Laura Archer Huxley, Aldous Huxley considered the discovery of psychedelics to be one of the three major scientific breakthroughs of the twentieth century, along with the splitting the atom and the manipulation of genes [20].

Huxley's last book, Island, presented a mirror image of Brave New World. He described a society in which real efforts were made to "realize human potentialities" by making "the best of both Eastern and Western worlds". The door to enlightenment in the imaginary island Kingdom of Pala was entered by taking an LSD-like drug he called *moksha*-medicine that was "the reality revealer, the truth-and-beauty" that enabled a user to be "liberated from his bondage to the ego" [9, p. 158]. These drug experiences were special, sacramental occasions, that did not happen every day [20], very much in accordance with Huxley's own limited number of psychedelic experiences that included taking LSD on his death bed [21]. In an interview for the BBC in 1961 Huxley reported two experiences with mescaline and perhaps five with LSD; his biographer estimated [22] he may have

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had around 11 or 12 psychedelic experiences over 10 years, a number that seems congruent with experiences mentioned in his correspondence with Osmond [23] and the memoirs of Laura Huxley [24] and Timothy Leary [25].

Huxley's influence on Osmond's psychedelic research

Huxley had a substantial influence on Humphry Osmond's research on psychedelic drugs in Saskatchewan via a regular and lengthy correspondence [26]. Osmond was a leading psychedelic researcher in North America who reported some of the first positive outcomes of the therapeutic use of LSD in alcoholism [12]. In their early correspondence, Huxley urged Osmond to coin a name for these drugs other than 'hallucinogen' or 'psychotomimetic' because Huxley argued that these terms stigmatised and pathologized mescaline. Osmond came up with "psychedelic" [27] in the oft cited verse [21]:

> To fathom Hell or soar angelic,
> Just take a pinch of psychedelic.

Huxley and Osmond proposed to establish "Outsight", a think-tank of intelligent, accomplished people who would take LSD or mescaline to assess its effects on creativity and intelligence [26, p. liii]. Osmond wanted to record mescaline interviews with 50–100 people, including the philosophers A.J. Ayer and Gilbert Ryle, and the novelist Graham Greene. Huxley unsuccessfully lobbied the Ford Foundation to fund this project.

Osmond came to share Huxley's exuberant enthusiasm for psychedelic drugs [27, p. 431]:

> "I believe that the psychedelics provide a chance, perhaps only a slender one, for *homo faber,* the cunning, ruthless, foolhardy, pleasure-greedy toolmaker to merge into that other creature whose presence we have so rashly presumed, *homo sapiens,* the wise, the understanding, the compassionate, in whose fourfold vision art, politics, science, and religion are one".

Psychedelic fellow travellers

Siff argues [6] that Huxley's intellectual celebrity and renown ensured that his advocacy of drug-induced mystical experiences generated widespread discussion of the possibility in the press. This encouraged many other intellectuals to follow his example in the hope of realising personally transformative mystical experiences.

Huxley also encouraged other psychedelic researchers such as Sidney Cohen at UCLA. Cohen gave LSD to Henry Luce, the politically conservative owner of Life and Time, whose magazines published positive stories on the religious uses of LSD into the mid-1960s [6]. Cohen later became a critic of

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nonmedical uses of LSD [28]. The actor, Cary Grant, gave LSD a celebrity endorsement [4] in women's magazines in 1958 after he underwent 100 LSD-assisted psychotherapy sessions.

Albert Hofmann – the discoverer of LSD - was sympathetic to these spiritual uses because he had mystical experiences of "oneness with nature" as a child [29]. He later had LSD and psilocybin trips with another advocate of the mystical uses of LSD, the right wing intellectual, Ernst Junger, who coined the term "psychonaut" [3]. Hoffman, however, was opposed to the use of LSD by youth and strongly disapproved of Timothy Leary's activities [29].

Huxley's hopes dashed

Huxley argued that psychedelic drugs should only be used to change the consciousness of the political and intellectual elite who, in turn, would radically change the way society functioned [6]:

> "Work privately. Initiate artists, writers, poets, jazz musicians, elegant courtesans, painters, rich bohemians. And they'll initiate the intelligent rich. That's how everything of culture and beauty and philosophic freedom has been passed on".

Leary, a Professor of Psychology at Harvard University, met Huxley in 1960 when he was a visiting professor of literature at MIT. Huxley gave him an excerpt from Theophile Gautier, one of the members of the club de Hashischins, on the necessity for preparation and a ''tranquil frame of mind and body''. Gautier promised ''ineffable pleasure'' to those followed his advice and ''terror'' and ''suffering'' to those who disregarded it [30]. Huxley also pressed on Leary his trickle-down theory of psychedelic enlightenment [6].

The success of Huxley's trickle-down plan for psychedelic enlightenment was thwarted by the countercultural embrace of psychedelic drugs, thanks in part to Leary's psychedelic evangelism. As part of the Harvard psilocybin project in the early 1960s, Leary gave psilocybin, and later LSD, to Harvard students and prisoners [4,6,31]. When he was forced to leave Harvard in 1963, Leary began to promote LSD use as a religious sacrament [4,31].

Leary was not the only psychedelic proselyte. Ken Kesey became a West Coast psychedelic evangelist after being given LSD at Stanford University as a student [3]. He promoted the use of LSD for fun, urging users to "freak freely". He travelled the USA in a school bus – Further – with the 'merry pranksters' staging "Electric Kool-Aid Acid tests" in which participants drank the neon-coloured American powdered "family" beverage alternative to Coca-Cola spiked with LSD while "tripping" to the music of the Grateful Dead [32]. Thanks to these activities, use of LSD became a rite of passage in the "counterculture" [33] popularised in the music of The Doors (who took their name from Huxley's book) and the Beatles' 1967 Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band.

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Before Huxley died in 1963, he and Osmond described Leary's flamboyant promotion of psychedelic use as too "experimental, too incautious, and too careless". Osmond later became disenchanted by the countercultural appropriation of psychedelic use which he foresaw would restrict their use as "telescopes of the mind" that he believed would enable a deeper appreciation of humanity rather than a voyage into temporary madness or an escape from the modern world [26, p. lvi].

Summary

Huxley's Doors of Perception provided intellectual celebrity endorsement of psychedelic drug use for spiritual purposes. His essay provided influential advice on how to arrange the setting to produce a mystical experience and his framing of the drug's effects provided the set for many who later followed his example. Huxley and Osmond's shared vision of psychedelics as a tool to transform society and save the human species came to grief after LSD was embraced as a recreational drug by the counterculture and banned under the Controlled Substances Act of 1970. We can see some contemporary indicators of renewed Huxleyan advocacy for psychedelic use in the largely positive media stories about the medical uses of psychedelic drugs (e.g. [34]) and a popular movement in the USA that is campaigning to decriminalise the nonmedical use of psychedelic mushrooms, ayahuasca and peyote [35].

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