



How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us about Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence,

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BOOK REVIEW

How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us about Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence, by Michael Pollan, Penguin Press, New York, 2018, 465 pp., \$28, ISBN: 9780241294222.

The modern (last 65 or 70 years) era of research regarding the use of psychedelic substances seems to fall quite naturally into two dichotomies.

The first dichotomy divides the results of such research into objective data versus subjective data. Objective data is quantitative and analyzed using statistical methods. Examples of such data would be scores on tests of depression and anxiety in terminal cancer patients, length of time abstinent from an addictive substance, and even the scores on tests that measure the depth or intensity of mystical or peak experiences that are achieved with the help of psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy. Primary examples of subjective data would be the verbal descriptions of such mystical or peak experiences, as well as non-verbal artistic creations intended to convey the power and meaning of psychedelic experiences.

The second dichotomy has to do with the context of psychedelic research. On one end of this dichotomy is highly structured and formal research legally conducted by credentialed scientists, usually taking place in universities or medical schools. On the other end is the informal underground, and often illegal, research that is conducted by those who have simply found themselves fascinated (usually through personal experience) by what psychedelic substances can offer when used in a careful and respectful manner.

These two dichotomies are almost certainly correlated. Objective data are more often reported in formal academic research, while subjective data are the more common product of underground research. In *How to Change your Mind*, Michael Pollan has done a magnificent job of exploring the full range of each of these dichotomies and then integrating for the reader what he has discovered.

An important part of Pollan's integration is his detailed history of both the formal research and the underground research. About 45 years ago, formal research was brought to a halt, at least in the United States, by government restrictions. While these restrictions had little if any impact on underground research, it took about 30 years until the current renaissance in the formal/legal psychedelic research could begin to emerge about 15 years ago. Pollan takes the reader on a journey through all these times and brings us up to date with the current status of psychedelic research. His assessment of the current status of the field is very positive. The promise of psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy,


especially with those facing death, is leading to a dramatic expansion of research around the world. What was once relegated to the margins of scientific interest and respectability is now mainstream.

In his thoroughness in covering both the objective and subjective domains, Pollan takes a bold step. He seeks out underground researchers and, with their help, has his own profound psychedelic experiences in carefully structured and supervised circumstances. Hence, he is uniquely qualified to integrate the domains of the subjective/objective dichotomy and the formal/underground dichotomy.

Pollan highlights one of the interesting dilemmas for modern renaissance scientists exploring the potential of psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy in formal research settings. As scientists, they are expected to be objective and have little if any stake in the outcome of their research. However, to serve responsibly and competently as guides or therapists to their research subjects, they must also have direct personal knowledge of the profound depth of experiences that psychedelics can facilitate and through which they intend to guide people. In the course of acquiring this direct personal knowledge, it seems unlikely that they would remain objective, at least in terms of enthusiasm for what they are studying.

How to Change Your Mind is not a scientific treatise. It is what is called "participatory journalism" and is written by a journalist, not a scientist. There are gaps in its history of psychedelic research that would not be accepted in the review of literature in the introduction to an article in a scientific journal. For some scientists, this may be a shortcoming of the book.

In the end, we can be grateful that the current renaissance in psychedelic research is flourishing and that someone as thorough and courageous as Michael Pollan is here to document it and bring it to our attention. For interested readers, this book will soften and integrate the dichotomies noted earlier.

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