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NON-ORDINARY STATES, ENTHEOGENS, AND THE
UNCONSCIOUS

In a recently published anthology entitled *The Psychedelic Policy Quagmire*, Dr. Ben Sessa has a chapter on the “Continuing History of Psychedelics in Medical Practice.” Sessa claims:

There is no reason why therapy rooms for psychedelic sessions must be adorned with the default Buddha icons, fractal posters, and Indian drapes. Who says these are the hallmarks of psychedelia? Why **not** have pictures of Lamborghinis, pop stars, and football teams – or any other power objects our patients choose to bring?¹

In making this claim, Sessa is addressing an ongoing tension between psychedelic use in medical practice and the larger cultural history surrounding psychedelics, or psychedelia. As is well known, the slow revival of government supported research into psychedelics since the 1990s has been accompanied by strict clinical practices that intentionally dissociate themselves from cultural associations with the 1960s countercultures. Nevertheless, in publication after publication, the relationship between spirituality, the “sacred,” religiosity, and psychedelics perpetually appear. In this paper, I argue that as contemporary professionals begin to integrate or reintegrate psychoanalytic therapeutic techniques and psychedelics, the overstated necessity for “hard” science models as a reaction to the cultural place of psychedelics, particularly in American liberal democratic culture, potentially affects the set and setting of psychedelic therapy. Moreover, I assert that, while admirable, the rhetorical efforts to deregulate psychedelics for therapeutic research often mask uncritical assumptions about both psychedelics and the unconscious. As an advocate of psychedelic research, I believe those within the community need to be more critical about the ways culture affects set and setting, particularly with notions of the unconscious imbricated in mid-twentieth century intellectual thought of members of the Eranos² group. I must begin with a few terminological distinctions. My essential question for this session is: Does the cultural-historical place that psychedelics occupy within “western” culture affect the intentional framing of set and setting in psychedelic therapy?

I must begin with a few terminological distinctions because the frames we develop around emergent psychedelic therapies are crucial in medicinal and therapeutic practices. The first distinction I need to make is that we need to have a critical separation between what some people call “non-ordinary” states of consciousness and “altered states,” or “shamanic states,” etc. This distinction, which involves issues of cultural competence and cultural humility, often goes unacknowledged with respect to psychotherapeutic models

¹ Ben Sessa, “Continuing History of Psychedelics in Medical Practice,” *The Psychedelic Policy Quagmire: Health, Law, Freedom, and Society*, Ed. J. Harold Ellens and Thomas B. Roberts, Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2015, 84.

² Hans Thomas Hakl, *Eranos: An Alternative History of the Twentieth Century*, Trans. Christopher McIntosh (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013).

used with psychedelic treatment. Such terminological distinctions bring with them what George Lakoff calls deep framing, imbricated in hierarchical and colonial thinking, by assuming that there is a normative or “ordinary state.” Stanislav Grof has noted these terminological problems and introduced the term ‘holotropic’ or “moving toward wholeness.” I use the terms in my paper title because they signal the historical nature of the problem I am addressing.

A second distinction I want to be clear about intensifies my argument and has to do with the term ‘entheogen’: historically, entheogens have not always been *necessary* for doing work in different “planes of consciousness,” “worlds,” “dream times,” etc., and when entheogens have been used, they have not necessarily been psychedelic substances. A conflation between ‘entheogens’ and ‘psychedelic’ masks assumptions about ‘religion’ as a static and trans-historical category. A recent example is William A. Richards’s book, *Sacred Knowledge*, in which his recently published research from the Johns Hopkins psilocybin studies affirms the claim that psychedelics prove that God, in some form, exists.³

Within discourse on psychedelics, language and naming has been an ongoing problem since Humphry Osmond coined the term in his letter to Aldous Huxley in 1957 in their attempts to replace the term ‘psychotomimetic.’ As is well known, ‘psychedelic’ means “mind-manifesting” and rests on common assumptions that there is something called “mind” to be manifested. The Freudian conception ought to be evident from the distinction of latent and manifest, thus framing discussions about psychedelics within a concept that they act to “unleash” or “emerge” or “make aware” the unconscious. ‘Entheogen,’ a term coined by Carl A. P. Ruck and R. Gordon Wasson, *et al.* in the late 1970s, carries obvious theological baggage with the Greek cognate ‘*theo*’ in the western tradition but religious studies scholarship has become highly skeptical of the concept of religion being entrenched within 19th and early 20th century colonialism.

With respect to the associations that LSD in particular had with mimicking psychosis, Charles Nichols notes that

The first scientific report proposing that the behavioral effects of intoxication by LSD resembled psychosis was published in 1947 (Stoll, 1947), the same year that LSD was made commercially available by the Swiss pharmaceutical company Sandoz. LSD was sold under the brand name Delysid and marketed as a tool for potential psychiatric treatment. Some sources have reported that Sandoz recommended that psychiatrists take the drug to “gain an understanding of the subjective experiences of the schizophrenic” (Ulrich & Patten, 1991).⁴

Few people are aware of the fact that before psychedelics such as LSD and psilocybin were made illegal in the United States, early clinical models of psychedelic therapy were “preceded by many hours of preparatory psychotherapy and require[d] a trained and experienced guide to handle all the complications that might

³ William A. Richards. *Sacred Knowledge: Psychedelics and Religious Experiences* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 211.

⁴ Charles D. Nichols, “Chapter 80 - Schizophrenia Modeling Using Lysergic Acid Diethylamide,” *Neuropathology of Drug Addictions and Substance Misuse*, Ed. Victor R. Preedy, San Diego: Academic Press, 2016, 859-865. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-800212-4.00080-7>.

occur.⁵ Various models were in use, but the model of the doctor taking the psychedelic substance with the patient while a nurse remained present at hand for emergencies had its roots in 19th century scientific practices where it was common for scientists to experiment by using their own bodies. We see this practice in aesthetes as well, from Charles Baudelaire's *Artificial Paradises* to Walter Benjamin's writings on hashish, but it *especially* came into use after Aldous Huxley convinced Timothy Leary, Ralph Metzner, and Richard Alpert to "translate" the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* as *The Psychedelic Experience*. Even this, as Donald Lopez has noted, was filtered through the already theosophical agenda of Evans-Wentz's translation of *The Tibetan Book* with one of its introductions by C. G. Jung.⁶ Little work has been done to unpack the problems of cultural framing throughout the 20th century with respect to the political theological conundrum psychedelics have come to occupy, although a growing body of scholarship on esoterism and Gnosticism among European intellectuals in the 20th century points to important political theological underpinnings of discourse on psychedelics.

This is all very philosophical and linguistic, but we could also raise a more practical issue: Can anyone imagine spending that much time with any one physician in current healthcare models in the U.S.? What existing inequities with respect to healthcare are perpetuated by the experiential time it takes to do psychedelic therapy? The shared experience of the patient-doctor relationship was obviously dropped within clinical settings that have slowly been seeing deregulation of Schedule I substances for research purposes. Grof notes a number of techniques in use by the 1980s in *LSD Psychotherapy*: psycholytic, psychedelic, anaclitic and aggregate, which range in interactivity between patient and therapist. Even in approaches where the therapist does not "trip" along with the patient, an extensive period of psychoanalytic therapy precedes the psychedelic session in which "the therapist explores the patients' life history, helps them to understand their symptoms, and specifically focuses on personality factors that could represent serious obstacles to achieving the psychedelic peak experience."⁷ The peak experience associated with psychedelic therapy in particular is, of course, "ego death and the subsequent transcendence into [...] the ecstatic state, characterized by the loss of boundaries between the subject and the objective world, with ensuing feelings of unity with other people, nature, the entire Universe, and God."⁸ Grof notes that while in traditional psychotherapy the patient is encouraged to explore his or her psychopathology, psychedelic therapy discourages such preoccupation and in general, "there is much more concern about transcending psychopathology than interest in its analysis." In psycholytic practice, on the other hand, the emphasis is on the psychedelic's ability to introduce the ecstatic state and the patient's internal capacity to heal, sometimes with suggestive guidance from the doctor, so the patient is left alone in a darkened "homelike" room with doctor and nurse within shouting distance. Grof notes that psycholytic therapy has a special affinity with psychoanalytic techniques used with schizophrenic patients where "it is necessary to abandon the orthodox analytic situation where the patient and is expected to share his or her free associations" with a detached therapist. The patient is encouraged to lay down and close his or

⁵ Stanislav Grof, "History of LSD Therapy," *LSD Psychotherapy*, Alameda: Hunter House Publishers, 1980. <http://www.psychadelic-library.org/grofhist.htm>.

⁶ Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

⁷ Stanislav Grof, *LSD Psychotherapy*, (California: MAPS, 2008), 37.

⁸ Grof, *LSD Psychotherapy*.

her eyes but may in the session move about, scream, etc. Grof overall laments the trappings of Freudian analysis with respect to LSD therapy and calls for some specific changes in practice that I discuss below, but he emphasizes a more fluid relationship between therapist and patient when psychedelics are involved.

In the well-known work of Rick Strassman's work on DMT he affirms that "the nature of psychedelic work is highly collaborative."⁹ Still, the ethical conditions surrounding human subject research are skeptical of situations where therapist and healer both partake. With DMT, this has led to the explosion of ayahuasca (*yage*) retreat centers and ayahuasca religion in South America and around the world. But these therapeutic centers and religious perspectives which often claim associations with indigenous practices often remain unaware of how much they fetishize the ingestion of the psychedelic or entheogen for the purpose of personal experience and a "self-help" frame that comes from western medical practices rooted in the stability of the individual.

Nicolas Langlitz's research published in *Neuropsychadelia* is important because it stands as an exception in relation to ethical concerns about psychedelics with humans in lab settings. Langlitz, who was already a medical doctor, did a second doctorate in anthropology where his ethnographic work in labs testing LSD on human subjects allowed him to combine participant observation with psychedelic experience. Langlitz, much like Richards, concludes that no matter how positivistic or "hard science" the methodologies were in the labs where he participated, the discussion of spirituality and God emerged from both patients and avowedly atheistic researchers, leading him to suggest that while the post 1960s research culture vilified the work of the early Harvard researchers and their exile to the Millbrook estate, they may have been onto something.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the methodological taboo remains in scientific circles and is itself entrenched within post WWII ethical discourse concerning human subjects well covered by Lee and Shlain's book *Acid Dreams* and *The Project MK-ULTRA Compendium*.

At the same time, popularized conceptions of Jungian psychology and the binary distinctions between sacred and profane (and "shamanism") advanced by Mircea Eliade saturate discourse on psychedelics, especially among advocates of decreased regulation. On the street and in illegal psychedelic therapy, the role of "guide" popularized by Leary *et al.*'s *The Psychedelic Experience* persists, especially in the popularization of ayahuasca ceremonies both in tourism and increasingly in yoga studios across the U.S.¹¹ While in many indigenous traditions, a "healer" or "shaman" might use a consciousness altering substance alone with community support, westerners seek out "drug experiences" for personal growth. Groups like MAPS (Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies) and their Zendo project at festival events like Burning Man also perpetuate the guide model, though they do not trip with patients but rather take care of people who have taken substances recreationally and are having a "bad trip." MAPS, along with many other advocates, use the biopolitical rhetoric of *becoming healthy* to

⁹ Rick Strassman, *DMT: The Spirit Molecule*, (Rochester: Park Street, 2001) 123.

¹⁰ Nicolas Langlitz, *Neuropsychadelia: The Revival of Hallucinogen Research Since the Decade of the Brain*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013.

¹¹ Ariel Levy, "The Drug of Choice For The Age of Kale," *The New Yorker Magazine*, Sept. 12 2016,
<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/09/12/the-ayahuasca-boom-in-the-u-s>.

deregulate controlled substances. Whether in recreational or clinical settings, however, one often sees entrenchment within the deep framing of liberal and western assumptions about the state of nature, metaphorically persistent in notions such as “the archaic revival” and “invisible landscape.”

Many enthusiasts see themselves as critiquing “Western” culture through the use of psychedelics, so there is an ongoing tension between deep cultural critique and efforts to “legitimize” work with alternating states in Western medical practices. For example, Ralph Metzner, despite his good intentions to critique the ills of Western culture, often describes psychedelics as giving access by which we might explore unknown continents – the final frontier of consciousness – mixed with language of revival. The acronym for MAPS is an obvious example, and Grof speaks of expanding the cartography of the psyche beyond the post-natal *tabula rasa* that characterized Freudian psychoanalysis. Metzner writes, “The revival of animistic, neopagan, and shamanic practices, including the sacramental use of hallucinogenic or entheogenic plants, represents a reunification of science and spirituality, which have been divorced since the rise of mechanistic science in the seventeenth century.”¹² It is this mixed metaphorical framing of revival and “frontierism,” I argue, that operates to meta-frame the set and setting and cultural desire or motivation to explore consciousness as a psychonaut. The colonizing associations of the metaphor may express a deeper Euro-centric cultural unconscious accompanying the “psychedelic explorer.”

Within that meta-framing, for example, exists troubling conceptualizing of what the unconscious itself is and a reoccupied discussion concerning Gnosticism in the Eranos group. The Eranos group began holding annual meetings in Switzerland on esoteric-related topics in 1933 after Rolf Otto suggested the idea to Olga Froebe-Kapteyn and continues to run. In his history of Eranos, Hans Thomas Hakl notes the dominance of Carl Jung’s presence during the 1940s¹³ and Henry Corbin’s ubiquitous presence from the late 1940s to the 1970s.¹⁴ Corbin Sufism was associated with the school of Traditionalism and Rene Guenon. Hakl also covers Mircea Eliade’s, to whom Corbin introduced to Eranos. Jung was enticed by National Socialism early on, though he later broke from it. Eliade had passionate associations early in his career with far right Christian and anti-Semitic group, “The Iron Guard,” in Romania. The far right tendencies of all of these thinkers and their youthful affinity for fascist political views has been the subject of much concern. Critical thinkers need to determine if there are social overlaps between these thinkers flirtations with fascist politics and their cosmological and metaphysical worldviews that inform the set and setting for so much work on psychedelics. The place of psychedelia in U.S. culture and its association with leftist politics obscures this, and so critical attention to the political tensions around Gnosticism in Europe acts as a shadow text from which to analyze later discussion around psychedelics.

Robert Ellwood’s *The Politics of Myth* discusses Jung and Eliade in detail, along with the celebrated mythologist Joseph Campbell. For my purposes here, which must be brief (I will explore it in more depth in future work), the seductive tendencies of collectivist and

¹² Ralph Metzner, “Introduction: Vine of Visions,” *The Ayahuasca Experience: A Sourcebook on the Sacred Vine of the Spirits*, Ed. Ralph Metzner (Rochester: Park Street, 2014), 5-6.

¹³ Hans Thomas Hakl, *Eranos: An Alternative History of the Twentieth Century*, 112.

¹⁴ Hans Thomas Hakl, *Eranos: An Alternative History of the Twentieth Century* 161-163.

anti-modern forces inhabit each of these thinkers, and are particularly rooted in notions of *volkish* nationalism and a collective unconscious. Although Ellwood ultimately argues these thinkers were more concerned with individualism and notes when some became disaffected with far right politics, Hakl locates the difficult discussion with Hans Jonas's critique of Eranos Gnosticism with an essentially dualist and anti-worldly position necessitated on a feeling of being alienated. Hakl argues that Jonas associated Gnosticism with his critique of his teacher, Martin Heidegger's, anti-modern views. Jonas argued against claims that Gnosticism is Jewish in origin but rather the influence of Hellenism within emergent Jewish sectarian culture, particularly through the figure of the demiurge Ialdobaoth, enemy of the Hebrew God. But Hakl argues that people no longer took such names literally and that at the 1966 meeting of Eranos, Carsten Colpe "argued convincingly that the names of these beings [so present in Gnostic discourse] denoted not gods but rather different aspects of the soul (in psychological language, various aspects of consciousness or "self").¹⁵ Even this brief excursion shows that psychological language is no mere "secularized" theological language for Europeans, it is instead entrenched in the *deep framing* of the European unconscious with its unrelenting emphasis on individualism and living "free" at the expense of others. We tend to lament "late capitalism's totality" but we have not done the analytic work within the European phantasy structures that give birth to such economic and, as Foucault might say, "disciplining" forces.

To return to psychedelic therapy, Stanislav Grof has suggested some specific changes that psychedelics bring to classic psychiatric and psychological models of therapy. First, he suggests that the Freudian "cartography" of human psyche postnatal biography was too limited. The Freudian individual unconsciousness is derivative of postnatal biography repression, memory, oedipal conflict, etc. He believes that the psyche permeates all of existence, including prenatal experience and the memory of how we were born, something which transpersonal psychology's emphasis on prenatal development has helped to correct. Grof notes how Jung helps psychedelic therapy by making psyche into anima mundi as well as Rudolph Otto numinous elements of psyche. From a therapist's perspective, you cannot use your intellect understand existence or to "fix" the patient, but you can create a special alchemical environment where the conscious ego communicates with "S" between conscious ego and Self. It follows from this that we must bring spirituality and religion back into therapy. We see the Gnostic element more clearly in Jung's work and his idea of collective unconscious. While his transgenerational and to use the later term "transpersonal" work inspires past-life therapy it also enables the "archaic revival" (Eliade's term) so popular among psychedelic enthusiasts.

As we saw above, Hans Jonas's critique was enacting a Jewish critique of anti-Semitism within Gnosticism. Like the culturally Jewish members of what came to be known as the Frankfurt School or Critical Theory, Jonas's critique also marks the material historical (at times Marxian) critique advocated a particular kind *historicism* to critique social and political conditions. Just as we might look to Freud's disdain for "Religion" in the life of a Jew in European anti-Semitic culture, we might look to Jung's privileged ability to flirt with fascism and expand into the collective as part of his culturally Christian frame. What is missing from both psychedelic and political discourse today is an integrated and interdisciplinary

¹⁵ Hans Thomas Hakl, *Eranos: An Alternative History of the Twentieth Century*, 265.

critical theoretical lens that allows us to unpack the “cultural” unconscious and deep framing at work in our political and economic systems.

Psychedelic research has potential as both a case study and possibly a methodology to do this work, but it requires us to have a postsecular approach to spirituality in order to have good therapy. As in situations of extreme trauma, according to the transpersonal model, a psycho-spiritual death and rebirth process helps in cases where one has to reach back into prenatal or birth experiences to untangle the trauma. Moreover, according to Grof, transpersonal approaches can take you to any point in human history, regardless of culture, language, ethnicity, etc. Grof is optimistic about the reintroduction of psychedelic research because now we are accustomed to experiential therapies which did not exist in the 1960s. I am skeptical in light of postcolonial critiques and the entrenchment of psychoanalysis in upper middle class patients. Again, I am reminded of the “cartographic” metaphors employed by otherwise exceptional and very important thinkers like Ralph Metzner.

As I have argued elsewhere,¹⁶ the appeal to an “archaic revival” has potentially dark political implications. While many associate the psychedelic movement with the left in the U.S., its connection to far right politics can be seen in its European roots and thinkers involved with the Eranos group. When we neglect to study intellectual movements like Eranos and the “Traditionalist school”, we have a limited perspective on psychedelics in history. Instead, psychedelics get framed too often as anodyne, both with nostalgia for the mid twentieth century and hope for the human potential or even a post-human future. Deleuze and Guattari, I believe, can help with this but the psychedelic community is woefully under-read in what Americans call poststructuralism. With respect to the unconscious, Deleuze and Guattari claim that “drugs give the unconscious the immanence and plane that psychoanalysis botched.”¹⁷ We might look to later post-structural and genealogical critiques such as Carl Raschke’s *Force of God* to begin to develop more sensible methodologies for theoretical critique, but suffice it to say here that political frames, like linguistic frames both affect and effect our understanding of the unconscious. Political framing (George Lakoff’s deep framing) manifests something larger, like a social or “cultural unconscious.” As we work to “reclaim” the unconscious for the interdisciplinary studies in the humanities, it may indeed require some “non-ordinary” states, but we must continue to ask: How do we track historical change *in the unconscious* rather than perform a mere intellectual history of the unconscious while simultaneously avoiding a simplistic return to metaphysics?

¹⁶ Roger K. Green, “Archaic Revivals and Shamanism in the Liberal Global Imaginary,” *The Psychedelic Press UK Journal*, vol. 12, 2015, <https://psychedelicpress.co.uk/products/psychedelic-press-uk-journal-2015-volume-iv>.

¹⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 1988), 284.