# The Exploration of Experience

## **Humphrey Osmond**

an excerpt from "A Review of the Clinical Effects of Psychotomimetic Agents" *Annals N.Y. Acad. Sci.*, March 14, 1957

Introduction: Humphry Osmond is a psychiatrist who participated in the early beginning of Canadian research with LSD and other psychedelic agents. He had the breadth of perspective and wisdom to early recognize the true nature and value of psychedelic substances. Quoting him from below, Dr. Osmond found "these experiences have been the most strange, most awesome and among the most beautiful things in a varied and fortunate life." This understanding prompted to him to seek out the effects of psychedelics when given to approximately 50 persons of recognized abilities. Again quoting from below, "Our subjects include many who have drunk deep of life, authors, artists, a junior cabinet minister, scientists, a hero, philosophers, businessmen, nearly all are agreed." The agreement is on the unique quality of the experience and that much of it is beyond speech. One of Dr. Osmond's subjects was Aldous Huxley, whose book the Doors' of perception became a classic source of information on the depth of understanding that could be revealed through the ingestion of mescaline. It was in this address to the New York Academy of Sciences that Dr. Osmond proposed the name which best describes the action of these mind-altering substances: psychedelic, or mind-manifesting, the name which is now widely recognized and accepted.

Our interest [in psychotomimetic drugs], so far, has been psychiatric and pathological, with only a hint that any other viewpoint is possible; yet our predecessors were interested in these things from quite different points of view. In the perspective of history, our psychiatric and pathological bias is the unusual one. By means of a variety of techniques, from dervish dancing to prayerful contemplation, from solitary confinement in darkness to sniffing the carbonated air at the Delphic oracle, from chewing peyote to prolonged starvation, men have pursued, down the centuries, certain experiences that they considered valuable above all others.

The great William James endured much uncalled-for criticism for suggesting that in some people inhalations of nitrous oxide allowed a psychic disposition that is always potentially present to manifest itself briefly. Has our comparative neglect of these experiences, recognized by James and Bergson as being of great value, rendered psychology stale and savorless? Our preoccupation with behavior, because it is measurable, has led us to assume that what can be measured must be valuable and vice versa. During the twentieth century we have seen, except for a few notables such as Carl Jung, an abandoning of the psyche by psychologists and psychiatrists. Recently they have been joined by certain philosophers. Pavlov, Binet, Freud, and a host of distinguished followers legitimately limited the field to fit their requirements, but later expanded their formulations from a limited inquiry to embrace the whole of existence. An emphasis on the measurable and the reductive has resulted in the limitation of interest by psychiatrists and psychologists to aspects of experience that fit in with this concept.

There was and is another stream of psychological thought in Europe and in the United States that is more suitable for the work that I shall discuss next. James, in the United States, Sedgwick, Myers, and Gurney in Britain, and Carl Jung in Switzerland are among its great figures. Bergson is its philosopher and Harrison its prophet. These and many others have said that in this work, as in any other, science is applicable if one defines it in Dingle's term, "the rational ordering of the facts of experience." We must not fall into the pitfall of supposing that any explanation, however, ingenious, can be a substitute for observation and experiment. The experience must be there before the rational ordering.

Work on the potentialities of mescaline and the rest of these agents fell on the stony ground of behaviorism and doctrinaire psychoanalysis. Over the years we have been deluged with explanations, while observation has become less sharp. This will doubtless continue to be the case as long as the observer and the observed do not realize that splendor, terror, wonder, and beauty, far from being the epiphenomena of "objective" happenings, may be of central importance.

Accounts of the effect of these agents, ranging in time from that of Havelock Ellis in 1897 to the more recent reports of Aldous Huxley are many, and they emphasize the unique quality of the experience. One or more sensory modalities combined with mood, thinking and, often to a marked degree, empathy, usually change. Most subjects find the experience valuable, some find it frightening, and many say that it is uniquely lovely. All, from Slotkin's unsophisticated Indians to men of great learning, agree that much of it is beyond verbal description. Our subjects, who include many who have drunk deep of life, including authors, artists, a junior cabinet minister, scientists, a hero, philosophers, and businessmen, are nearly all in agreement in this respect. For myself, my experiences with these substances have been the most strange, most awesome, and among the most beautiful things in a varied and fortunate life. These are not escapes from but enlargements, burgeonings of reality. Insofar as I can judge they occur in violation of Hughlings Jackson's principle, because the brain, although its functioning is impaired, acts more subtly and complexly than when it is normal. Yet surely, when poisoned, the brain's actions should be less complex, rather than more so! I cannot argue about this because one must undergo the experience himself. Those who have had these experiences know, and those who have not had them cannot know and, what is more, the latter are in no position to offer a useful explanation.

Is this phenomenon of chemically induced mental aberration something wholly new? It is not, as I have suggested earlier. It has been sought and studied since the earliest times and has played a notable part in the development of religion, art, philosophy, and even science. Systems such as yoga have sprung from it. Enormous effort has been expended to induce these states easily so as to put them to use. Although occasionally trivial and sometimes frightening, their like seems to have been at least part of the experience of visionaries and mystics the world over. These states deserve thought and pondering because until we understand them no account of the mind can be accurate. It is foolish to expect a single exploration to bring back as much information as twenty of them. It is equally foolish to expect an untrained, inept, or sick person to play the combined part of observer, experienced and recorder as well as a trained and skilled individual. Those who have no taste for this work can help by freely admitting their shortcomings rather than disguising them by some imposing ascription.

This may seem mere nonsense but, before closing his mind, the reader should reflect that something unusual ought to seem irrational because it transcends those fashionable ruts of thinking that we dignify by calling them logic and reason. We prefer such rationalized explanations because they provide an illusory sense of predictability. Little harm is done so long as we do not let our sybaritism blind us to the primacy of experience. especially in psychology.

Psychoanalysts claim that their ideas cannot be fully understood without a personal analysis. Not everyone accepts this claim, but can one ever understand something one has never done? A eunuch could write an authoritative book on sexual behavior, but a book on sexual experience by the same author would inspire less confidence. Working with these substances, as in psychoanalysis, we must often be our own instruments.

Psychoanalysis resembles Galileo's telescope, which lets one see a somewhat magnified image of an object the wrong way round and upside down. The telescope changed our whole idea of the solar system and revolutionized navigation. Psychotomimetic agents, whose collective name is still undecided, are more like the radar telescopes now being built to scan the deeps of outer, invisible space. They are not convenient. One cannot go bird watching with them. They explore a tiny portion of an enormous void. They raise more questions than answers, and to understand those answers we must invent new languages. What we learn is not reassuring or even always comprehensible. Like astronomers, however, we must change our thinking to use the potentialities of our new instruments.

Freud has told us much about many important matters. However, I believe that he and his pupils tried illegitimately to extrapolate from his data far beyond their proper limits in an attempt to account for the whole of human endeavor and, beyond this, into the nature of man and God. This was magnificent bravado. It is not science, for it is as vain to use Freud's system for these greatest questions as it is to search for the galaxies with Galileo's hand telescope. Jung, using what I consider the very inadequate

tools of dream and myth, has shown such skill and dexterity that he has penetrated as deep into these mysteries as his equipment allows. Our newer instruments, employed with skill and reverence, allow us to explore a greater range of experience more intensively.

There have always been risks in discovery. Splendid rashness such as John Hunter's should be avoided, yet we must be prepared for calculated risks such as those that Walter Reed and his colleagues took in their conquest of yellow fever. The mind cannot be explored by proxy. To deepen our understanding, not simply to great madnesses but of the nature of mind itself, we must use our instruments as coolly and boldly as those who force their aircraft through other invisible barriers. Disaster may overtake the most skilled. Today and in the past, for much lesser prizes, men have taken much greater risks.

#### How Should We Name Them?

If mimicking mental illness were the main characteristic of these agents, "psychotomimetics" would indeed be a suitable generic term. It is true that they do so, but they do much more. Why are we always preoccupied with the pathological, the negative? Is health only the lack of sickness? Is good merely the absence of evil? Is pathology the only yardstick? Must we ape Freud's gloomier moods that persuaded him that a happy man is a selfdeceiver evading the heartache for which there is no anodyne? Is not a child infinitely potential rather than polymorphously perverse?

I have tried to find an appropriate name for the agents under discussion: a name that will include the concepts of enriching the mind and enlarging the vision. Some possibilities are: psychephoric, mind moving; psychehormic, mind rousing; and psycheplastic, mind molding. Psychezynic, mind fermenting, is indeed appropriate. Psycherhexic, mind bursting forth, though difficult, is memorable. Psychelytic, mind releasing, is satisfactory. My choice, because it is clear, euphonious, and uncontaminated by other associations, is psychedelic, mind manifesting. One of these terms should serve.

#### Epilogue

This, then is how one clinician sees these psychedelics. I believe that these agents have a part to play in our survival as a species, for that survival depends as much on our opinion of our fellows and ourselves as on any other single thing. The psychedelics help us to explore and fathom our own nature.

We can perceive ourselves as the stampings of an automatic

socioeconomic process, as highly plastic and conditionable animals, as congeries of instinctive strivings ending in loss of sexual drive and death, as cybernetic gadgets, or even as semantic conundrums. All of these concepts have their supporters and they all have some degree of truth in them. We may also be something more, "a part of the main," a striving sliver of a creative process, a manifestation of Brahma in Atman, an aspect of an infinite God imminent and transcendent within and without us. These very different valuings of the self and of other people's selves have all been held sincerely by men and women. I expect that even what seem the most extreme notions are held by some contributors to these pages. Can one doubt that the views of the world derived from such differing concepts are likely to differ greatly, and that the courses of action determined by those views will differ?

Our briefs, what we assume, as the Ames demonstrations in perception\* show, greatly influence the world in which we live. That world is in part, at least, what we make of it. Once our mold for world making is formed it most strongly resists change. The psychedelics allow us, for a little while, to divest ourselves of these acquired assumptions and to see the universe again with an innocent eye. In T. H. Huxley's words, we may, if we wish, "sit down in front of the facts like a child" or as Thomas Traherne, a seventeenth-century English mystic, puts it, "to unlearn the dirty devices of the world and become as it were a little child again."\*\* Mystic and scientist have the same recipe for those who seek truth. Perhaps, if we can do this, we shall learn how to rebuild our world in another and better image, for the breakneck advance of science is forcing change on us whether we like it or not. Our old faults, however, persisting in our new edifice, are far more dangerous to us than they were in the old structure. The old world perishes and, unless we are to perish in its ruins, we must leave our old assumptions to die with it. "Let the dead bury their dead" tells us what we must do.

While we are learning, we may hope that dogmatic religion and authoritarian science will keep away from each other's throats. We need not put out the visionary's eyes because we do not share his vision. We need not shout down the voice of the mystic because we cannot hear it, or force our rationalizations on him for our own reassurance. Few of us can accept or understand the mind that emerges from these studies. Kant once said of Swedenborg, "Philosophy is often much embarrassed when she encounters certain facts she dare not doubt yet will not believe for fear of ridicule." Sixty years ago orthodox physicists knew that the atom was incompressible and indivisible. Only a few cranks doubted this. Yet who believes in the billiard-ball atom now?

In a few years, I expect, the psychedelics that I have mentioned will seem as crude as our ways of using them. Yet even though many of them are gleanings from Stone Age peoples they can enlarge our experience greatly. Whether we employ these substances for good or ill, whether we use them with skill and deftness or with blundering ineptitude depends not a little on the courage, intelligence, and humanity of many of us who are working in the field today.

Recently I was asked by a senior colleague if this area of investigation lies within the scope of science and, if it does not, should not religion, philosophy, or politics take the responsibility for it? But politics, philosophy, religion, and even art are dancing more and more to the tune of science, and, as scientists, it is our responsibility to see that our tune does not become a death march, either physical or spiritual. We cannot evade our responsibilities.

So far as I can judge, spontaneous experience of the kind we are discussing has always been infrequent, and the techniques for developing it are often faulty, uncertain, clumsy, objectionable, and even dangerous. Our increasingly excellent physical health, with the steady elimination of both acute and chronic infections, the tranquilizers that enable us to neutralize unusual chemoelectrical brain activity, our diet, rich in protein and, especially, B-complex vitamins whose antagonism to LSD I have already discussed-all of these, combined with a society whose whole emphasis is on material possession in a brightly lit and brilliantly colored synthetic world, will make spontaneous experiences of the sort I have mentioned ever fewer. As we grow healthier and healthier, every millimeter that we budge from an allotted norm will be checked.

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. Surely we must seize that chance.

\*"... the principle that what we are aware of is not determined entirely by the nature of what is out there or by our sensory processes, but that the assumptions we bring from past experience, because they have generally proved reliable, are involved in every perception we have." (back)

\*\* Also Francis Bacon, the father of modern scientific method, in *Novum Organum*, wrote, "The entrance into the Kingdom of man, founded on the sciences, being not much other than the entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven, whereinto none may enter except as a little child." (back)

### Summary

After indicating that there are a number of substances at present subsumed as psychotomimetic agents I have indicated that these are not yet clearly defined, and I have suggested that while mimicking psychoses is one aspect of these agents, it is not the only or even the most important one. I have discussed their great antiquity and have shown how they have attracted man since the dawn of history. Since many drugs produce changes in both body and mind I consider that some working definition is required that will exclude anesthetics, hypnotics, alcohol, and the derivatives of morphine, atropine, and cocaine. I have suggested as a definition: "psychotomimetic agents are substances that produce changes in thought, perception, mood and sometimes posture, occurring alone or in concert, without causing either major disturbances of the autonomic nervous system or addictive craving, and although, with overdosage, disorientation, memory disturbance, stupor, and even narcosis may occur, these reactions are not characteristic."

This definition, of course, will be modified as knowledge grows.

I have discussed model psychoses induced by means of these agents and have indicated the existence of many gaps in our understanding. I believe that the

lack of such information has delayed tile development of the sort of inquiry that has recently led to work with adrenochrome, adrenolutin, and bufotenin, mentioning some of the difficulties that beset those who work with the newer and truer psychotomimetics. I have suggested how model therapies modifying model psychoses and the study of means of aggravating or prolonging them provide useful information, and have touched on some of their uses in psychotherapy, emphasizing how much is still unknown.

I believe that there is a place for the use of these substances in the training of psychiatrists, psychologists, nurses, and others working with the mentally ill. I have linked these agents with recent work on the reduced and specialized environment by Hebb and Lilly, and I have discussed some psychological, social, and philosophical implications inherent in this inquiry, relating them to the newer work on perception.

In view of all these considerations, I have suggested that "psychotomimetic" is far too narrow a generic term, and I have suggested several that imply alterations in the normal mind. Among these proposed designations are "psychehormic," "psycherhexic," and "psychezymic," my own preference being "psychelytic," or **"psychedelic"--mindmanifesting**.

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