

A Philosophical Journey into the Heart of the Psychedelic Dream

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When Alexander Shulgin tried mescaline for the first time in 1960, little did he know that the experience would change not only his own life but the lives of millions around the world. The trip ignited in him a fierce interest in psychoactive substances and marked the beginning of a long and colorful journey into the psychedelic universe that would result in the synthesis, creation and bioassay of over 500 new psychoactive compounds over the course of fifty years.¹

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At the time, Shulgin was a senior research chemist at Dow Chemical Co., a position that gave him access to the chemicals and equipment needed for synthesizing drugs like mescaline. He would insist on trying each unknown and untested psychoactive compound created in the lab until he was convinced that it was safe; then, he would gather with his wife, Ann, and a close group of friends to try it out and extensively document the experience. Over time, the group developed the Shulgin Rating Scale to assess the subjective intensity of a psychoactive compound in a semi-objective way, along with an entire lexicon for describing the physical, visual, and emotional effects of these substances.²

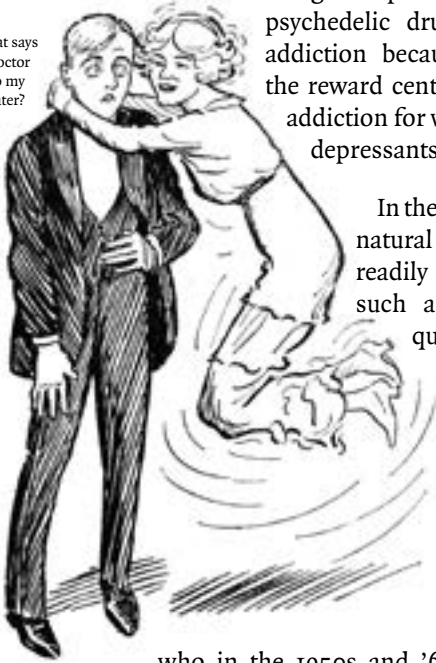
In many ways, Shulgin's methodical approach seemed like a logical continuation of the psychedelic tradition. For thousands of

1. "Alexander 'Sasha' Shulgin"

2. The scale uses pluses, from 1 to 4. +: effects are noticeable. ++: effects are unmistakably present but can still be ignored or repressed by the seasoned researcher. +++: the experience is more intense and overpowering, and can no longer be ignored. ++++: This is it. *Samādhi*. Enlightenment. Divine, transcendental bliss.

years, psychedelic substances have been used in religious contexts as vehicles for spiritual awakening, shamanic healing, and mystical revelation. Unlike drugs such as alcohol, opium, or cocaine, which primarily affect motor coordination and how one feels *within* physical reality, psychedelics have the unique potential to seemingly alter that reality itself. One's perception of the world can be infused with geometric patterns, unbelievably bright colors, or even outright hallucinations; cognition is enhanced and made more creative; affects are stronger and deeper; and one may even feel communication with higher spiritual beings. Furthermore, most psychedelic drugs carry no risk for physical addiction because they tend not to stimulate the reward centers that serve as mechanisms of addiction for various stimulants, sedatives, and depressants.

What says
the doctor
to my
water?



In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, natural psychedelics became more readily available and new psychedelics, such as LSD, were synthesized. The question now became what place these substances would take up in an increasingly secular world in which drug use and religious doctrine came to be thought of as diametrically opposed.

One answer came from the psychologist Timothy Leary, who in the 1950s and '60s began championing the use of psychedelic drugs as a way for people to expand their minds, overcome psychological issues, and lead more interesting and fulfilling lives. In other words, Leary suggested that, even outside a religious context, drug use might still lead to important insights and profound experiences.

But, of course, not everyone saw such promise in psychedelic drugs—not even everyone using them. In *Fear and Loathing in Las*

Vegas, Hunter S. Thompson, a major figure in psychedelic culture, describes his own drug use in terms of excess and self-destruction and considers Leary's optimism misguided and even dangerous. In one particularly biting passage, he writes:

*"All those pathetically eager acid freaks who thought they could buy Peace and Understanding for three bucks a hit... a generation of permanent cripples, failed seekers, who never understood the essential old-mystic fallacy of the Acid Culture: the desperate assumption that somebody... or at least some force—is tending the light at the end of the tunnel."*³

His critique of Leary suggests that psychedelic drug use has replaced old religious traditions with a new, blindly hopeful one resembling a cult. Instead of promoting understanding and engagement with the world, Thompson characterizes Leary's psychedelia as an escape from life and all of its responsibilities.

This is where Shulgin enters the picture. Through his research and documentation, Shulgin took a normally mysterious realm of human experience and infused it with a scientific and experimental spirit—a methodology of taking drugs that had clear objectives. And with the possibility of synthesizing more and more drugs, there seemed to be no end in sight to psychedelic progress. Shulgin's experimental method allowed room for enlightenment while moving away from blind belief and destructive excess; ultimately, it rested on the conviction that careful and considerate use of psychedelic drugs really could lead to personal betterment.

There are some who obviously do not share Shulgin's vision of psychedelic progress. In 1994 the DEA raided Shulgin's lab, revoked his license, and fined him \$25,000, effectively preventing him from carrying out further large-scale psychedelic research. Over the last few decades, the federal government has classified psychedelics, such as LSD, magic mushrooms, and DMT, as Schedule I substances—the highest classification of illegal substances, meaning the government sees them as having a high potential for abuse, no accepted use in

3. Thompson

medical treatment, and being generally very unsafe. But questions arise. Can one make the same judgment about the incredibly addicting heroin and the completely non-addictive LSD? Can one make the same judgment about methamphetamine, one of the most harmful drugs in the world, and magic mushrooms, one of the least? Though questions surrounding substances like heroin, methamphetamine, or even alcohol are open to debate, almost nobody would argue that being a heroin addict or an alcoholic is better than not being one, or that smoking meth will improve one's quality of life. But the same does not seem to be the case with LSD, magic mushrooms, or DMT.

I understand that what the DEA and other parts of government decide to do about drugs involves questions of legal practice, economics, and politics, and addressing these issues is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, I would like to ask the philosophically directed question: what role do psychedelic drugs play in peoples' lives, and more importantly, what role should they play? In other words, what is the place of psychedelics in the good life?⁴

Shulgin's picture of drug use seems to be so different from that of a heroin addict or an alcoholic that it merits an investigation of its own. But where does one begin?

One place to start is by following Shulgin's own trail. In 1991 and 1997, respectively, Shulgin and his wife co-authored PiKHAL and TiKHAL⁵, charming semi-autobiographical accounts along with complete synthesis procedures and documented reports for almost every drug Shulgin ever made. What had previously been confined to scientific journals and an elite group of friends was unleashed on the world. Anybody who understood the complex chemistry in the instruction procedures could now synthesize, experience,

4. By "good life" I mean our general, common-sense idea of the good, ethical life, and not on any specific philosophical conception of the good life. An interesting approach for a different essay might be to take the good life as defined by, for example, Aristotle, and see if the use of psychedelics can be made to fit this conception.

5. Acronyms for Phenethylamines and Tryptamines I Have Known and Loved, respectively. Phenethylamines and tryptamines are the two most common groups of chemicals that tend to have psychoactive properties.

and distribute a plethora of psychoactive compounds. Shulgin's improvements on the synthesis of MDMA (commonly known as ecstasy), made it easier to produce and led to its increased popularity and availability.

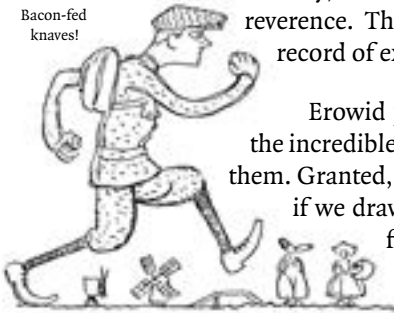
Though ecstasy was mainly used as a cheap party drug, the ever-expanding range of psychedelics found people who, like Shulgin, were interested in experimentation and the possibility of personal change. Shulgin's close group of friends transformed into a worldwide community of "trippers" devoted to trying different drugs and documenting their experiences on forums across the Internet. One of their foremost achievements is the website Erowid, which provides detailed information about psychoactive substances, such as proper dosage and appearance, medical advice, and methods for testing the purity of a compound.

While these features are valuable, deep within the "vaults of Erowid" lies the real treasure: experience reports. Here, people from all around the world describe in detail their various experiences with drugs. They take up Shulgin's semi-objective terminology for



subjective sensations but infuse them with their own commentaries about the nature of drugs, life, and happiness.

There is no limit to what one can find in the Erowid vaults. One user documents, in rather striking detail, the effects of drinking a cup of yerba mate. He takes down the time when he drinks the mate and every five or ten minutes describes what the sensations are, how he feels about them, what he manages to accomplish, and so on. On the other end of the spectrum, there is the twisted, train wreck of a story about a man from Maine who consumes the deliriant *Datura*, and, after nearly setting his house on fire and jumping out of the second-story window, wakes up naked 48 hours later, covered in his own feces, huddled in the corner of an unfamiliar house, carefully watched by people he does not recognize, in what turns out to be the state of *New Hampshire*, with absolutely no recollection of how he got there.⁶ Stories like this expose us to the chilling, even haunting power of psychoactive substances. Nevertheless, the *Datura*⁷ experience is the exception rather than the rule; most trip reports fall into some middle ground with equal parts hilarity and despair, mildness and intensity, shallowness and profundity, ennui and reverence. They are a place for self-expression and a record of experimentation.



Bacon-fed
knaves!

Erowid provides the perfect opportunity to study the incredible diversity of drugs and the people who use them. Granted, while there is the danger of a sample bias if we draw conclusions using only this source, the forum's reports mostly come from people consciously experimenting with drugs as a method of exploration, not people who are just looking to get fucked up. Additionally, the range of drugs and people represented on Erowid is so vast and varied that it seems fair to think of it as an accurate cross-section of people experimenting with psychedelics across the world.

6. "Datura - That Terrified, Naked Man In the Corner Is Me - 55588"

7. Of all the trip reports on Erowid, the accounts of *Datura* continue to strike me as the darkest; a good portion of users cause harm to themselves or others, and many end up spending anywhere from a night to a few weeks in a jail, hospital or mental asylum.

In traversing the depths of Erowid, I have been repeatedly struck by the predominance of certain questions. The first is one of control and power. Some users approach psychedelics with a clear agenda: they set up goals that they want to achieve while under the influence and use meditation and fasting to achieve the focus they need in order to carry these out. In fact, before they were banned, LSD, magic mushrooms, and ketamine were beginning to gain popularity in therapy, and in recent years, as the bans on these substances have been lifted for research purposes, more evidence has come forth suggesting that they may in fact be useful in behavioral therapy.⁸

At the same time, psychedelics show that there is more to addiction than physical dependence. Some live for the weekends when they can binge on MDMA, LSD, mushrooms, or some other substance that delivers them from the real world and into a fairy tale of vivid hallucinations, powerful illusions, and dominating euphoria. Even the so-called “experimenters,” whose psychedelic quests are supposedly meant for research or careful enlightenment, often seem to be deceiving themselves about what they are doing, using the guises of “experimentation” and “research” to cover up their contempt for sobriety. A common theme in trip reports is for the tripper to contemplate their own drug use and realize that what started out as careful and curious exploration has turned into mostly mindless consumption that has taken over other aspects of their life. Behind their purported experimentation with LSD or magic mushrooms lies a terrifying emptiness and lack of meaning and purpose.

The second question is that of pain and pleasure. The most basic fact about drugs, even psychedelics, is that they make us *feel* differently, and that we are inclined to take drugs that make us *feel better*. Not only can psychedelic drugs induce powerful feelings of empathy, joy, and peace during the experience, there are also “afterglow” effects, meaning that the person taking psychedelics often has residues of these feelings even after the drug has worn off. For example, in one recent study, people who took magic mushrooms reported feeling more “open” to the world up to a year after taking them.⁹

8. Vollenweider and Kometer

9. Szalavitz

But there is also something problematic about the feelings psychedelics induce. Pain and pleasure, grief and joy—these are usually markers by which we judge how we are getting by in the world. But drug use artificially simulates these feelings without providing a real connection to what is going on in the world. Users of MDMA, for example, describe feeling incredibly good—but not *about* anything in particular, just *good*. This not only isolates one from the real world but also cheapens the very meaning and value of “good.” There is a danger that what it really means to be happy, to feel and to be good, will be somehow changed, diminished, and perhaps even forgotten through the use of drugs.

The third question is that of meaning and value. In addition to shifting one’s visual, auidial, and tactile perceptions of the world, as well as intensifying and expanding on one’s affects, many psychedelics are “entheogenic”; they enhance religious and spiritual senses. A common effect of smoking DMT is to have the sense that someone or some “thing” is present in the room; others have out-of-body experiences. In an increasingly secular age, these religious and spiritual senses have nevertheless retained the role of understanding one’s purpose or place in the world, where the real value in life can be found, and what the right course of action or right way of living is. At the pinnacle of these experiences is the much sought-after “++++” state, which Shulgin describes as some sort of mystical union with the universe and divine bliss, and which can supposedly change one’s life forever.

But there is a danger to this aspect of drug use, however, when the “search” for insight, wisdom, or spiritual union and communication replaces actually living one’s life. The presentation of psychedelic drugs as the solution to problems of meaning seems to itself give rise to more problems than solutions. There is always the question, of course, of whether these “insights” are actually worth anything, or whether they are merely delusions induced by drugs. Furthermore, there is the question of reliance and even dependence on drugs for the answers to life’s problems. What looks like a deep search for meaning and understanding through the use of entheogens may turn out to be, on closer analysis, a cheap, fleeting substitute for an authentic attempt to figure things out on one’s own.

These questions in no way exhaust the problems of drugs, but they open up a deeper discussion of the place of drugs in the good life. Though I have attempted to explore both sides of this issue, a serious investigation of these questions would require not only far more scientific research, but also a deeper understanding of the values at stake in experiences of power, pleasure, meaning, and spirituality. And it seems only fair to say that one would have to experience the subjective states induced by these drugs for oneself. A full investigation, in short, is outside the scope of this essay.

On some level, I fear that we can never conclude what role drugs should play in our lives because there is no definitive answer to what constitutes a life well-lived. And so it does not make sense to think that the problem of drugs might one day be settled once and for all. Rather, the question is foremost a practical one: how do I live in a world inhabited by psychedelic drugs, in a world where I can, for example,



spend \$2 on a bit of white powder and, as a user reporting on the dissociative MXE puts it, enter a state of “divine, godlike, ecstatic bliss...an unparalleled state of transcendental contentedness” where “you feel, in a word, like God”?¹⁰ In a world where these drugs and thousands of others are made available through online black market vendors, making it possible to obtain nearly any psychoactive substance with a few clicks of the mouse, should I spend those two dollars and seek divine status? And, if not, is it because I am living in fear of what that would do to me, or of legal retribution, or because I have been inculcated through schools and society to treat such behavior as wrong?

In sharing these stories and thoughts, I have relied on my conviction that there are important questions surrounding psychedelics that extend past the legal and medical issues that so often dominate the discourse, and that drug use should not be written off as something obviously wrong or obviously good. My

10. “Methoxetamine & Cannabis - How Can One Live With Such Knowledge?”

inquiry into psychedelic culture has helped me realize that at the heart of every psychedelic experience there is a human being, full of doubts and fears, but also hopes and pleasures, joys and sorrows, capable of suffering and happiness, of doing good and doing bad. Everybody is still trying to figure it out; what to think about drugs—and what to do about them—is just a part of that. Whether one tends to agree more with Shulgin or Thompson; whether one thinks that drugs can bring about deep personal change or only a cheap thrill; whether one thinks psychedelics should be respected and admired or feared and banished, whether one approaches them with a sense of experimental wonder or careful wariness—in the end, these are all just answers we’ve provided to the inevitable questions raised by the presence of psychoactive drugs in our lives, and we will continue to provide them as long as we live.

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