

HOW TO CHANGE YOUR MIND: WHAT THE NEW SCIENCE OF PSYCHEDELICS TEACHES US. . . .

(MICHAEL POLLAN)

October 12, 2018

I have led a boring life, at least as measured by the topics covered by this book, Michael Pollan's *How to Change Your Mind*. Not only have I never taken any psychedelic drug of any type, I have never taken any illegal drug at all. Similarly, I have never had any type of mystical experience whatsoever, though I am certainly open to such a thing and have total confidence that many other people have. Just not me. But here, as in many matters, others go where I have not tread. Pollan, famous mostly for books on food, decided to explore drug-induced alterations of consciousness, and this book is the measured result of his spelunking in the caverns of the mind.

I suppose that psychedelics might be interesting for me. Among other benefits, they are said to provide a lasting uptick in the personality characteristic "openness to experience," in which I am very low indeed, according to test results. But I am a bone-deep paranoid, of whom long ago it was said that my core belief is "bad people are everywhere, and they must be put down." Therefore, the chances that I would perceive ghostly enemies in my fever dreams, and then reach for my boot knife, seem to me far too high to risk taking any drug that alters perception of reality. So all this is abstract to me, and will remain so.

As far as the book, this is, disappointingly to some, not a book about Pollan's own experiences with drugs, although those do figure. Those expecting an updated version of Aldous Huxley's florid *The Doors of Perception* will not find it. This is a book mostly about history and science, cut with ten percent description of the author's closely controlled personal experiences with psychedelic drugs. In other words, Pollan is not an evangelist or proselytizer for drug use; his advice is thoughtful, rather than enthusiastic.

The first two hundred pages are history. It should have been fewer, and could have been fewer, if Pollan had cut out the unbelievable number of references to the "moral panic" that we are told resulted in psychedelics being suppressed in the 1970s, largely a result of the clownish behavior of Timothy Leary. I am perfectly willing to believe that there

was a somewhat unjustified overreaction, but the constant characterization of the suppression of psychedelics as only a panic, and therefore wholly irrational, are obviously wrong even on Pollan's own account, and smack of an aging baby boomer's moral preening. In any case, Pollan starts by talking about recent revived interest in using psychedelics, primarily psilocybin, derived from mushrooms, to treat conditions such as depression and anxiety among terminal cancer patients, as well as more mundane problems like nicotine addiction. Then we are taken backward, to the original 1943 synthesis of LSD and its use, and misuse, over subsequent decades, as well as the history of other psychedelics.

The focus is on psychedelics as a class, not on the many varieties thereof, few of which are specifically delineated. Pollan mostly talks to various figures, ranging from scientists now carefully studying psychedelics in accordance with strict regulations, to elderly hippies and their younger disciples still flogging LSD as a miracle that will bring mankind together. Many of the latter are flakes, prone to what Pollan charitably calls "intellectual extravagance." The scientists, on the other hand, are mostly hesitant to ascribe mystical powers to these drugs, including one who boldly goes way out on a limb, saying "I'm willing to hold the possibility these [mystical] experiences may or may not be true." Along the way, we learn what psilocybin mushrooms look like, how they grow, and how to take them, which might be useful for some of us, especially since many mushrooms that look very similar permanently crash your liver.

Finally, we get to what everyone really wants to read, which is Pollan's own drug travelogue. He took, at separate times, three drugs: LSD, psilocybin, and something obscure named 5-MeO-DMT, or "the Toad," extracted from, you guessed it, the venom of a Mexican toad. He details the run-up to each use in excruciating detail, and also narrates the actual experiences, which are pretty disappointing, both to the reader and, for the most part, to Pollan. He did not have any earthshattering mystical experiences, and the Toad was terrifying. He did have various experiences revolving around dissolution of the ego, the most common characteristic of all psychedelics, something that he, a mostly no-nonsense, goal-oriented person, found quite interesting and valuable. He saw and interacted with dead relatives. But all in all, this is pretty pedestrian, and

most of what is interesting about drug trip descriptions in this book comes from quotes from people other than Pollan.

Then, after fifty pages of travelogue, it's back to another two hundred pages of the more boring stuff, in this case science, especially examinations of how precisely it is psychedelics work (answer: nobody knows anything very concrete, and from notes and parentheticals, it's evident Pollan is exaggerating what little agreement there is), along with possible present-day applications of psychedelics to medicine. These actually seem quite promising, even if phrases like "it could be" and "isn't entirely clear" keep cropping up. Certainly, if I suffered from untreatable depression, or someone close to me did, I would consider psychedelic therapies. And that's it for the book. Frankly, it's on the boring side.

Still, we can pick out of this several interesting facts, or at least facts I found interesting. For one example, there is substantial evidence that young children's minds have much in common with the mind of an adult on psychedelics. Adults develop useful mental shortcuts that cut out the sense of open-ended wonder, and the drugs seem to, in some instances, restore it, or a facsimile of it. (This reminds me of the classic science fiction story "Mimsy Were the Borogroves," in which a brother and sister can see the real meaning of the Lewis Carroll nonsense poem "Jabberwocky," and use it to vanish into thin air, watched by their father, "in a direction he could not understand.") For another, the effects on any individual of any psychedelic drug are tremendously dependent on the setting in which the drug is taken, and even more on what the user expects to happen. Pollan notes that there is substantial debate about whether the popularity of Huxley's book in fact created much of the experiences that users have since had, and whether if that book had not been written, those experiences might have been largely different. There is also a side-mention, not explored further, that Europeans have far fewer mystical experiences under the influence of psychedelics than do Americans, which seems like it would bear further exploring, but the topic never recurs.

More broadly, all the discussion in the book offers an obvious question—what does the use of psychedelics, and what they appear to reveal to the user, say about the nature of reality and of consciousness? Despite the desperate flailing of materialists like Steven Pinker, there is no evidence whatsoever that consciousness is the product of the brain, rather

than an external phenomenon mediated by the brain, as Henri Bergson, among others, would have it. Of course, there is little evidence of the latter, either. We just don't know. Pollan, certainly, is sympathetic to the idea that psychedelics reveal evidence for the latter, though he is very cautious in his approach. No doubt, listening to the stories of drug users, many of whom are utterly convinced of having had, in William James's terms (from *The Varieties of Religious Experience*), an ineffable, noetic experience, one feels the pull toward believing that psychedelics can provide direct evidence of, and direct access to, a wholly different realm.

On the other hand, I think that one single fact, that neither Pollan nor anyone else that I know of discusses, strongly suggests that all psychedelic experiences are merely internal manifestations of the mind. This is that no new substantive knowledge is ever gained. If the individual consciousness were actually being exposed to, or subsumed into, or enfolded with, some universal or greater consciousness, some set of until-then unknown truths would seem certain to emerge. That could be anything—a scientific fact, the existence of aliens with specific verifiable facts about themselves, or merely exposure to another consciousness merging with yours (as opposed to the interactions with internally generated avatars of others that seem common, separately from the merging phenomenon, which Pollan himself experienced), or some kind of telepathy. But not once is such a thing ever mentioned, which strongly suggests that psychedelic experiences are purely internal, though I suppose they might be revealing underlying structural truths, even if they do not reveal identifiable higher level or new knowledge.

The most interesting elements of the book, though, concern the intersection of religious belief and what is perceived under the influence of these drugs. It's not just the drugs—even before he took LSD, Pollan's "guide" had him do basic breathing exercises that put him in a hallucinatory trance, completely without drugs. (This is probably why the Orthodox, in repetitious prayer regimens, strongly caution against the untutored engaging simultaneously in the breathing exercises sometimes done by monks.) But there seems little doubt that many users experience effects that are the same as those identified as mystical religious experiences in William James's classic book. The question is, what does that mean, or show?

We have to clear out some underbrush first. Pollan, a genial atheist, seems completely unaware, no doubt because everyone who touched this book before publication was equally unaware, that many of the supposedly novel thoughts that come to him under the influence of psychedelics are commonplaces about reality in Christian theology. “I felt for the first time gratitude for the very fact of being, that there is anything whatsoever. Rather than being necessarily the case, this now seemed quite the miracle. . . . Everybody gives thanks for ‘being alive,’ but who stops to offer thanks for the bare-bones *gerund* that comes before ‘alive?’” Every well-educated Christian, that’s who, and Pollan could do worse than reading David Bentley Hart on this topic, though any major Christian writer from the second century A.D. onward would do. Similarly, the idea of ego dissolution in an overwhelming and loving whole, which at the same time mystically maintains the individual’s ability to perceive, is nothing more than an attempt to describe the traditional Christian view of Heaven, best expressed in the Orthodox concept of *theosis*, though here lacking the presence of God, what Catholics call the Beatific Vision (the absence of which, again, suggests to a Christian that all this is purely internal to the drug user, though perhaps not less relevant for that). So, Pollan says of an atheist’s drug use, “Not only was the flood of love she experienced ineffably powerful, but it was unattributable to any individual or worldly cause, and so was purely gratuitous—a form of grace.” Any Christian would recognize this as an everyday description of Christian belief; the only things of interest are the direct experience, rather than its mere narration, and that the woman who experienced it described it as “being bathed in God’s love” and had lost her fear of death, yet insisted she was still an atheist, which seems highly unlikely, unless “atheist” is code for “my friends will think I’m weird if I say I believe in God.”

This offers the second obvious question—does this imply that psychedelic drugs offer evidence of the truth of Christian belief, given how closely some of these visions align with core revealed truths found in Christianity? There may also be parallels with certain threads of Buddhism (about which I am ill-informed, hence my hesitation), although the retention of the individual’s viewpoint after the dissolution of ego runs counter to what I understand of “nirvana.” At the beginning of the book, Pollan notes that the original acid trip of the inventor of

LSD, Albert Hofman, exhibited “neither the Eastern nor the Christian flavorings that would soon become conventions of the genre.” And then Pollan never returns to either “convention.” This was extremely disappointing to me. The only later mention of Christianity is the vision of a hard-core alcoholic mother, who admits she completely failed her children, being told by Jesus that she shouldn’t spend any time beating herself up, because nonjudgmentalism. That may be a Christian flavoring to the drug experience, but more likely, it’s what Oprah told the woman last time she was drunk, which was yesterday (the alcoholic, not Oprah, though maybe Oprah was drunk yesterday too). What I wanted to hear was if anyone under the influence of psychedelics ever had direct, specifically Christian revelation, such as regarding the Trinity, or Christ saying something not banal, or even an inkling of the Communion of Saints. I suspect not, or we would have heard of it. Which, again, suggests all this is internal, or at least it suggests that to a Christian.

Regardless, none of this means it’s a good idea for Christians to take drugs. In fact, it’s almost certainly a very bad idea. Shortcuts generally mean trouble, and I am reminded of the words of Abraham to the rich man, pleading to return to Earth to warn his brothers of the wages of sin, “If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.” Moreover, there is no reason to suppose that only pleasant or truth-telling invisible realities would be revealed by a drug that could tear the veil of the world. Although Pollan does not mention it, one psychedelic, dimethyltryptamine, often gives the user the perception of contact with intelligences, “machine elves” or “chattering angels.” That sounds dangerous. No, on balance, these are things to be avoided.

Still, that’s not to say that there’s no benefit in undercutting materialism by recognizing what psychedelics may be and do. Somewhere, Steven Pinker is rending his garments, wailing that the peasants shouldn’t be permitted to believe in a transcendent reality, because then they will be insufficiently enlightened, and will immediately go back to burning witches, led by priests who believe in vampires. To me, opening the possibility of a broader reality in this gray, de-magicked age is a feature, not a bug, regardless of whether there is any underlying reality to what drug users are shown under the influence.