

Commentary on William Braden's Mescaline Experience by Peter Webster

How is it possible for two persons of such obvious intellectual talent as William Braden and Aldous Huxley to have such radically different experiences as a result of ingestion of a similar quantity of mescaline? Both Huxley and Braden brought to their first psychedelic experiment a wide knowledge and understanding of science, religion, mysticism, literature and fine arts, yet Huxley's initial psychedelic experience was a revelation, and led to the writing of *The Doors of Perception*,

a book which launched a movement, if not a revolution. William Braden's experiment, recounted in the Postscript of his book,

The Private Sea,

could not have been more opposite to Huxley's. Anguish and torment forced Mr. Braden to ask that the experience be terminated with the anti-psychotic drug Thorazine, and several days of painful recovery, he tells us, ensued.

The so-called "bad trip" has been the occasional result in both psychedelic research and the clandestine use of psychedelics since the 1950s. Authorities of all persuasions have warned us of the ever-present risk, and that it is next to impossible to predict if a given personality will experience the negative aspect of psychedelic experience. It has also often been observed that a bad experience may even follow several positive, ecstatic ones, for no apparent reason. Even the careful control of the supposed principal determinants of the experience, *set and setting*, seems to leave a way open for negative experience, and indicates a crucial lack in the understanding of how and why a bad experience may arise. Or so it has been repeatedly said.

The set and setting hypothesis may fail to provide control or understanding of the occurrence of negative experience for a very good reason: Although many investigators have attempted to understand the content of psychedelic experience solely in terms of the set and setting of the experiment, I feel there is more of tautology than scientific theory in this "explanation." Saying that the psychedelic experience depends on set and setting is rather like saying that the weather is dependent on the contents of the atmosphere. The weather *IS* the contents of the atmosphere, and the psychedelic experience

IS

the set and setting of the time and place in which the psychedelic drug is taken. This is, of course, the case with everyday experience as well: the set and setting of your day at the office

IS

the experience of your day at the office. The set and setting hypothesis really "explains" nothing we don't already know. We will have to delve a little deeper than a comparison of the set and setting of the experiences of Braden and Huxley to understand the extreme difference of result.

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There has been a continuing ignorance by a great many of the players in the psychedelic controversy concerning the experience of tribal man, both past and present. The visionary realms sometimes attained through the use of psychedelic drugs have been visited since time immemorial, and for a modern researcher to ignore what tribal man has to say on the subject of psychedelic experience is a serious oversight. Especially guilty have been those on the side of Prohibition of the psychedelic drugs, whether government minister or categorically-abstinent researcher: the great majority of persons who have themselves experienced the psychedelic vision have subsequently educated themselves on the subject of shamanism and the use of psychedelic plants by the tribal practitioners of early medicine and religion. At the same time the Prohibitionists, including some eminent researchers, have gone so far as to insist that those having themselves taken psychedelics are irrevocably tainted, and incapable of judging the results of their own investigations. The very existence of such an attitudinal conflict among trained thinkers suggests that modern rationality may not be all that it is cracked up to be, and might also be an intimation of at least one of the sources of negative psychedelic experience.

If one starts, of course, with the premise that tribal man is primitive, ignorant, backward, incapable of rational thought, lost in delusion, etc., then a complete disregard for the hundred-thousand years (or more) of tribal psychedelic research follows. Such a premise may play an important and stifling role in the outlook of many moderns, even those who believe themselves far more broad-minded, as the roots of prejudice are notoriously difficult to uncover. But the brain of *Homo sapiens* has had exactly its present macroscopic and neurological structure for at least 150 thousand years, and although early man of course did not have the (not all that certain) advantage of modern culture as a tool, it is preposterous to believe that a nervous system capable of creating symphonies and relativity theories was simply not employed to full capacity before modern times. Evolution does not work like that. The human brain would not have evolved to its present capability had there been no aboriginal use for all that symphony- and relativity-theory-producing hardware. The chronic skeptic will demand, "well what do you propose those primitives were doing with all that hardware?" If we would listen to them, instead of eradicate them, we might begin to know.

Many modern thinkers, of course, *have* been listening. But they are not usually among the cohort of institutional professionals who practice hard, reductionist science. They are rather specialists on mythology such as Joseph Campbell, anthropologists such as Michael Harner, ethno-botanists such as Gordon Wasson and Richard Evans Schultes, or psychedelic researchers such as Humphrey Osmond and Albert Hofmann. Recognition of such pioneers by mainstream science and society, not to mention Nobel Prizes and the like, will not likely occur soon. Yet these are the very workers, and fields of endeavor, which we must listen to very closely not only to understand what early man has to say, but also to understand the nature of the psychedelic experience and cause of the occasional "bad trip." Only by listening to the psychedelic wisdom of the ages have we a chance for understanding how we moderns fit into this very large picture. In evolutionary time, we are but a mere blip, an exaggeration, perhaps an aberration which might well soon self-destruct for lack of ageless wisdom, for lack of listening to our ancestors who, with perceptions and thoughts every bit as human, and every bit as potent as our own, ensured human survival for greater than 99% of the time of human life on earth.

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A principal lesson from the psychedelic past, which applies not only to the use of visionary plants but to the optimal structuring of society itself, is the importance of myth and ritual, both for daily and seasonal life, and for the seeking of ultimate or mystical understanding by a tribe or people. Today there are many who would deny the importance, or even the presence of myth and ritual as an underlying factor in their lives. But as with the atheist, such denial is as much a mythology and ritual as the denial of God by the atheist is in a very real sense, a religion: An equivalent amount of faith is required to believe that God does *not* exist (for there can be no absolute proof either way).

A great and modern myth is that we no longer live by myths, but hard facts, and perhaps peoples of all times and places found it difficult to *know* the myths they lived by, the underlying paradigm of their metaphysic. But the principal difference with all tribal peoples as compared to us moderns, was that they all, without fail, developed elaborate ritual and shamanism as a central guiding framework for their lives. The myth and ritual of tribal man was a living, evolving, all-encompassing structure, continually being added to, and providing the long-term practical *and*

metaphysical understanding which kept such societies stable and functioning for periods of time which make a mockery of modern societal systems. For ritual today we have very primitive and impotent relics indeed: empty "religious" charades on the one hand, and a cut-throat tooth-and-nail paradigm of capitalistic competition to the death as our day-to-day program for survival. And compounding such a sickness-producing paradigm, the conviction that we live by truth alone! If these be our myths and rituals, we do not need to take psychedelics to experience a bad trip, for we are already on one.

The primary importance of myth and ritual for understanding the psychedelic experience, as well as for structuring psychedelic experiments is today illustrated most forcefully by the use of peyote by the Native American Church. In the ceremonies of the NAC, quite powerful doses of peyote are often ingested, and "bad trips" essentially never occur. The few documented cases of negative result have uniformly involved a misuse of the sacrament outside of NAC ceremonies, non-compliance with the wisdom of the *road-men* or psychedelic guides for the ceremonies, or the simultaneous use of alcohol. Within the structure of the NAC, the peyote sacrament has continually been a very powerful and efficacious one: by the definition of *sacrament*

which we use in the Christian tradition, peyote seems to many to be far more the genuine article than the wine or bread, whose potency one must take on faith alone. (Note that the mescaline which Huxley and Braden ingested, is the main active component of peyote.) So let's get this straight: the primitive, backward, ignorant, irrational Indian, laboring under a childish and simplistic religious paradigm, can ingest heroic quantities of a potent "hallucinogen" and derive the most positive, reliable, reproducible and in every sense of the word, *human*

effects from this "risky" behavior; yet one of us modern, rational, truth-loving supermen know not whether the same dose might send us permanently over the brink and into the looney-bin. I detect a faulty paradigm somewhere.

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Aldous Huxley writes in *Heaven and Hell*, a book written two years after *The Doors of*

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### *Perception:*

I have spoken so far only of the blissful visionary experience and of its interpretation in terms of theology, its translation into art. But visionary experience is not always blissful. It is sometimes terrible. There is hell as well as heaven.

Like heaven, the visionary hell has its praeternatural light and its praeternatural significance. But the significance is intrinsically appalling and the light is 'the smoky light' of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*

, the 'darkness visible' of Milton. In the *Journal d'une Schizophrene*

, the autobiographical record of a young girl's passage through madness, the world of the schizophrenic is called *le Pays d'Eclaircissement*

- 'the country of lit-upness.' It is a name which a mystic might have used to denote his heaven.

But for poor Renée, the schizophrenic, the illumination is infernal - an intense electric glare without a shadow, ubiquitous and implacable. Everything that, for healthy visionaries, is a source of bliss, brings to Renee only fear and a nightmarish sense of unreality. The summer sunshine is malignant; the gleam of polished surfaces is suggestive, not of gems, but of machinery and enamelled tin; the intensity of existence which animates every object, when seen at close range and out of its utilitarian context, is felt as a menace.

And then there is the horror of infinity. For the healthy visionary, the perception of the infinite in a finite particular is a revelation of divine immanence; for Renée, it was a revelation of what she calls 'the System,' the vast cosmic mechanism which exists only to grind out guilt and punishment, solitude and unreality.

Sanity is a matter of degree, and there are plenty of visionaries who see the world as Renée saw it, but contrive, none the less, to live outside the asylum. For them, as for the positive visionary, the universe is transfigured - but for the worse. Everything in it, from the stars in the sky to the dust under their feet, is unspeakably sinister or disgusting every event is charged with a hateful significance every object manifests the presence of an Indwelling Horror, infinite, all-powerful, eternal.

This negatively transfigured world has found its way, from time to time, into literature and the arts. It writhed and threatened in Van Gogh's later landscapes; it was the setting and the theme of all Kafka's stories; it was Gericault's spiritual home; it was inhabited by Goya during the years of his deafness and solitude; it was glimpsed by Browning when he wrote *Childe Roland*; it had its place, over against the theophanies, in the novels of Charles Williams.

The negative visionary experience is often accompanied by bodily sensations of a very special and characteristic kind. Blissful visions are generally associated with a sense of separation from the body, a feeling of deindividuation. (It is, no doubt, this feeling of deindividuation which makes it possible for the Indians who practise the peyote cult to use the drug not merely as a short cut to the visionary world, but also as an instrument for creating a loving solidarity within the participating group.) When the visionary experience is terrible and the world is transfigured for the worse, individualization is intensified and the negative visionary finds himself associated with a body that seems to grow progressively more dense, more tightly packed, until he finds himself at last reduced to being the agonized consciousness of an inspissated lump of matter, no bigger than a stone that can be held between the hands.

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It is worth remarking, that many of the punishments described in the various accounts of hell are punishments of pressure and constriction. Dante's sinners are buried in mud, shut up in the trunks of trees, frozen solid in blocks of ice, crushed beneath stones. The Inferno is psychologically true. Many of its pains are experienced by schizophrenics, and by those who have taken mescaline or lysergic acid under unfavourable conditions.

What is the nature of these unfavourable conditions? How and why is heaven turned into hell? In certain cases the negative visionary experience is the result of predominantly physical causes. Mescaline tends, after ingestion, to accumulate in the liver. If the liver is diseased, the associated mind may find itself in hell. But what is more important for our present purposes is the fact that negative visionary experience may be induced by purely psychological means. Fear and anger bar the way to the heavenly Other World and plunge the mescaline taker into hell.

And what is true of the mescaline taker is also true of the person who sees visions spontaneously or under hypnosis. Upon this psychological foundation has been reared the theological doctrine of saving faith - a doctrine to be met with in all the great religious traditions of the world. Eschatologists have always found it difficult to reconcile their rationality and their morality with the brute facts of psychological experience. As rationalists and moralists, they feel that good behaviour should be rewarded and that the virtuous deserve to go to heaven. But as psychologists they know that virtue is not the sole or sufficient condition of blissful visionary experience. They know that works alone are powerless and that it is faith, or loving confidence, which guarantees that visionary experience shall be blissful.

Negative emotions - the fear which is the absence of confidence, the hatred, anger or malice which exclude love - are the guarantee that visionary experience, if and when it comes, shall be appalling. The Pharisee is a virtuous man; but his virtue is of the kind which is compatible with negative emotion. His visionary experiences are therefore likely to be infernal rather than blissful.

The nature of the mind is such that the sinner who repents and makes an act of faith in a higher power is more likely to have a blissful visionary experience than is the self-satisfied pillar of society with his righteous indignations, his anxiety about possessions and pretensions, his ingrained habits of blaming, despising and condemning...

In *The Doors of Perception* Huxley reveals the secret in an even clearer way (at this stage, he recounts his experience at the height of the mescaline's effect):

'If you started in the wrong way,' I said in answer to the investigator's questions, 'everything that happened would be a proof of the conspiracy against you. It would all be self-validating. You couldn't draw a breath without knowing it was part of the plot.'

'So you think you know where madness lies?'

My answer was a convinced and heartfelt, 'Yes.'

'And you couldn't control it?'

'No, I couldn't control it. If one began with fear and hate as the major premiss, one would have to go on to the conclusion.'

Young people who have explored consciousness with the aid of psychedelic drugs have

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usually done so in a spirit of love, love of adventure, love of exploration, love of freedom, love of community... The older, "wiser" folk of today more often explore for competitive or compulsive reasons, for fame, to achieve, to ascend the ladder of success, to cement preconceptions into certainties... Such exploration is often mixed with a compulsive or chronic skepticism, constructed perhaps from previous entrapment in folly during youth. Arthur Koestler was deceived into supporting the Communist movement in Russia for a time, even after he had toured the country and seen, not the desolation that he should have, but instead believed the empty promises of the doctrine he had espoused. The discovery of his self-deception produced an exaggerated skepticism in his later years, hence his rejection of the psychedelic experience as "pop Zen" (in *The Ghost in the Machine*). Perhaps It is not surprising that he also had a negative experience in an experiment with psychedelic drugs. And as for skepticism, Jean-Paul Sartre was a chronic skeptic if ever there was one, and he, too, experienced only the negative aspects of psychedelics in his first and only psychedelic experiment. The experiments of such as these are essays in search of proof that nothing has been missed, they do not start with a premise of openness and love of life for its own sake, as Huxley has prescribed, but of exclusion and suspicion, precisely the formula for torment.

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From the viewpoint revealed by these several (not altogether congruent) paragraphs, it is not hard to see why the chronic skeptic, the hardened reporter, William Braden, might not be able to shed his defenses, and paradigm, to experience the age-old visionary reality. He sees a cartoon-world which he takes for hard, cold "reality," the kind of world his underlying mythology has created, and yet the visionary psychedelic wisdom unlocked by these chemicals does not permit him to believe in his own paradigm. He "knows" plenty about Eastern philosophy, about western science, about anything you can name, but it is all theoretical knowledge, none of it bonded to ultimate experience, and so his world is, in the final analysis, artificial, not "reality-based" as he is bound by his metaphysic to believe. Suddenly he *experiences* that artificiality in full force, with all the implied consequences and contradictions, and of course, it is too much to take. What is surprising about bad trips is not that they occur, but that they are not predominant. The power of these substances to forbid the lie of an empty metaphysic, a hard, cold world of facts devoid of ultimate mystery and spirituality, would seem to me to require bad trips almost every time for us moderns. It is the obvious near-indestructibility of the human spirit, the almost unbelievable fact that man survives in this lunatic world still for the most part unscathed, that explains much about the results of psychedelic experience and why it is not usually or even uniformly a negative experience. Thanks be to those such as Huxley for providing a light in our darkness, so that at least a few of us may find our way through.

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