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# Bakunin and the Entheogenic Challenge to Atheism

Sebastian Job

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2016

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of our own history is proving pretty vexed, it might pay to investigate whether we have not been trying to deliberate and struggle on the basis of an all too superficial attunement to existence.

The significance drawn from entheogenic experiences depends, it should be stressed, on how they are interpreted and integrated. Historically the ‘interpretations’ and ‘integrations’ have run the gamut from obsessional sacrifice of the Aztec kind, to the Kogi people’s quasi-Platonic Idealism, from Aldous Huxley’s cultured elitism, to Terence McKenna’s Joycean anarchism. No political position can claim ownership of the entheogenic zone. Indeed, from inside the zone political discourses and institutions may look entirely ridiculous. And yet, as we have also seen, the entheogens readily bring a ‘Gaian message’ of ecological kinship. There might be, then, if we are bold enough to take it, some help on offer here.

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dominant reality principle, receives a particularly clear ecological vindication.

In addition, as we saw in the case of Enrique, entheogens may give rise to experiences we can call 'absolute'. The lexicon on the DMT Nexus refers to 'End of the Line' experiences, where 'you feel as if you have reached the Absolute Point. The Alpha and the Omega of the universe and your entire existence'. Another entry speaks of 'The Central Light':

A light source, overwhelming all other experiences and perceptions... The light possesses an intelligence. The intensity of the experience is so extreme and lets all other experiences fade to the background that the notion arises of a "central" light, like central or primal to all experience or existence. A sort of ontological bottom / centrum / axis of hyperspace... In a religious paradigm, the traveller might interpret the Central Light as Buddha, Christ, Krishna or any other radiant and ultimate being in his or her religious paradigm.<sup>51</sup>

The message of such experiences, I think, is that existence has a Centre. And indeed that this Centre is perfect. This message, of course, is completely at variance with the whole tenor of modern secular culture. From the displacement of the geocentric universe with Copernicus, to the displacement of the ego by the unconscious with Freud, and on through the decentering discoveries of general relativity, anthropology, history, gene science, and much else, we have taught ourselves how literally eccentric we are. However, 'absolute experiences' are making a comeback from unexpected quarters. They are also far more accessible, in principle, than the Abrahamic 'religious paradigm' ever supposed they were. It would be pretty rash, I think, to judge their truth-value without having them. And given that, in would-be democratic modernity, taking charge

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

high energy and vibration as well as frantic activity. All One. Feels oddly familiar—maybe where you were before birth and will return after death? Everything that ever is, has been, can be, will be, never was, never could be...<sup>50</sup>

The decision one makes in regard to the spiritual-religious faculty is a cardinal one for the interpretation of the human predicament, but for many rationalists it is a decision made, experientially speaking, on an empty tank. The entheogens are fascinating because they rapidly redress that lack. In a few minutes they reveal how parochial all the standard secular critiques of religion really are. To be sure, they likewise tend, at least among the western users I have been studying, to make Biblical literalism, and the exclusivist claims of any one religion, seem laughable. Atheism in some expanded sense—that is, one that allows for the credibility of spiritual experience—remains a completely viable position, while atheism as an abstract intellectual possibility remains, of course, a precious cultural conquest that must be protected against the obscurantism of those ready to condemn ‘blasphemers’ and ‘apostates’.

The formula ‘the credibility of spiritual experience’ has, in this context, a few implications. Viewed entheogenically, spiritual experience stands, I think, for a kind of existential resource, a zone to which one can go for perspectival shifts, a place where one feels and knows differently, independent, to an incalculable degree, from the ways of feeling and knowing inculcated by contemporary pragmatic, culturally institutionalised, politically delimited, ‘consensus reality’. From the evidence, psychedelics, and perhaps especially the tryptamines, let our kinship with other species, our entanglement in the vast ‘web of life,’ move from being a proposition of the biological sciences to something wondrously apparent, something internalised. With the entheogens, then, ‘spirituality’, as the name for this release from the narrow experiential strictures of the

<sup>50</sup> wiki.dmt-nexus.me

## ABSTRACT

As fossil fuelled capitalism drags global civilisation towards the strange attractor of ecological implosion, can we get any help from outside (what the secular mainstream in the west generally recognises as), the human social field? This paper makes the case for the pedagogical potential of the naturally-occurring psychoactive ‘entheogens’, that is, substances which, taken sacramentally, are held to ‘engender the divine within’. Handled in a thoughtful way, these substances, I argue, are potential allies for the remaking of the revolutionary movement in an age where human extinction is now thinkable. Between the existing radical left in its various forms, and this ally, however, there are some obstacles. One such obstacle is the atheism of the dominant European revolutionary tradition. In this paper Mikhail Bakunin’s influential critique of religion as a form of human domination, as an enemy of human freedom, is taken as exemplary of this tradition. The testimony, meanwhile, of entheogenic experience puts this familiar leftist-atheist standpoint in question. Drawing on fieldwork and interviews with users of entheogens including ayahuasca, vaporised DMT, and 5-MeO-DMT toad venom, I argue that a left willing to open itself to these experiences could gain a new standpoint from which to oppose and outflank capitalist ecocide.<sup>1</sup>

Keywords: Bakunin, God, Hegel, ayahuasca, entheogens, 5-MeO-DMT, ecology, atheism, left.

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‘There are no atheists after 0.4mgs of DMT’.<sup>2</sup>

Anon.

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was prepared for the ‘Mikhail Bakunin Bicentennial Conference (1814–2014)’, Pryamukhino, Russia, 2014. My thanks to the anonymous referees who provided valuable comments on this piece.

<sup>2</sup> Anonymous participant in Rick Strassman’s intravenous DMT study, quoted by study participant Susan Blumenthal in ‘Spirit Messengers’, in-a-perfect-

There exists a class of molecules that stands apart from all others. This is the class with the property of radically but temporarily altering human consciousness. New types are invented weekly; many are naturally occurring. Avoiding the pejorative and question-begging flavour of ‘hallucinogens’, we can speak generically of ‘psychoactives’. In the mestizo shamanic tradition in the Iquitos region of Amazonian Peru, where I have worked, many of the naturally occurring psychoactives in traditional use are called ‘teacher plants’ (*plantas maestras*), and the pedagogical emphasis here is well merited.<sup>3</sup> However, these substances are also found outside the plant kingdom. As a rule of thumb we can say that the terms ‘psychedelics’ (LSD, mescaline, DMT, psilocybin), ‘dissociatives’ (ketamine, *salvia divinorum*), and ‘empathogens’ (MDMA, MDA), refer to different types within the broad class of psychoactive substances when there is no explicit emphasis on sacramental usage. ‘Entheogen’, a neologism which means literally to generate or engender the divine within, refers to any of these substances, natural or synthetic, and indeed others, such as cannabis, coca leaves, and even tobacco, but only when they are employed in the service of healing, enlightenment, initiation, social bonding, and similar intentional uses.

The term ‘entheogen’ was invented, in 1973, to recall psychedelic enthusiasts to ancient traditions of ritualised use of psychoactives. The term consequently refers to pre-modern as well as contemporary practices.<sup>4</sup> While in common parlance ‘psychedelic’ might be said to reference the vast and wild terrain of

stream left continues to speak, and think, as if these colossal terrains of the mind had never been discovered. Obviously this cannot be put down to simple intellectual inertia. It presumably has to do with the lack of fit between the social struggles that command the left’s attention and the psychoactive experiences themselves. Correlatively, there remains a large cultural rift between those who seek social liberation and those who seek spiritual liberation.

Yet the problem of ecological finitude is pressing on us. In this context, the task for activists is not reducible to coming up with the right set of ideas that can then be struggled around to bring about, let us say, the overthrow of the 0.1%. Between good ideas for a viable society and the larger population there lies the deep river of psychosocial experience, of what it is like, in various places and social locations, to live and sense the world at this time. Existing globalised, industrialised, urbanised society anaesthetises people to our collective predicament. This, of course, was the diagnosis of religion itself, by Bakunin as much as Marx, but today the church has mostly ceded that function to money, habit and the screen, while the entheogens are the opposite of the soporific narcosis of bureaucratically routinised, consumerist existence.<sup>48</sup>

All religions,’ opined Bakunin, ‘with their gods, their demigods, and their prophets, their messiahs and their saints, were created by the credulous fancy of men who had not attained the full development and full possession of their faculties’.<sup>49</sup> Here, meanwhile, from another perspective, is the attempted definition of ‘Breakthrough’ given on the DMT Nexus website:

Beyond life or death. Beyond time or space or known dimensions. Inherently synaesthetic. Ultra sharp edges and highly polished surfaces. Endlessly morphing and fractalising details. A sense of extremely

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world.podomantic.com. See also R. Strassman, *DMT: The Spirit Molecule: A Doctor’s Revolutionary Research into the Biology of Near-Death and Mystical Experiences* (Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press, 2001), p.230.

<sup>3</sup> See L. E. Luna, ‘Entheogens’ in J. Narby and F. H. (eds.), *Shamans through Time: 500 Years on the Path to Knowledge* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2001), pp. 227–230.

<sup>4</sup> J. Ott, *The Age of Entheogens and the Angels Dictionary* (Natural Products Co., 1995).

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<sup>48</sup> P. McLaughlin, *Mikhail Bakunin: The Philosophical Basis of His Anarchism* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2002) p. 148.

<sup>49</sup> Mikhail Bakunin, *God and the State*, 1971, [dwardmac.pitzer.edu](http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu)

The standpoint which one needs to assume in order to make sense of this at first sight all too clever argument, is what Hegel calls, at the close of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ‘absolute knowing’. This he characterises as the standpoint in which ‘the separation of the object from the certainty of oneself is completely eliminated’.<sup>46</sup> Without attempting to argue the case, it seems plausible that Hegelian ‘absolute knowing,’ notwithstanding Hegel’s polemics with Jacobi, Schleiermacher and others concerning religious experience, might be one of the few modes of modern western philosophical thought capable of engaging seriously with the most self-evidently ‘divine’ aspects of the entheogenic experience.<sup>47</sup> This, transparently, cannot be said for Bakunin’s dialectical naturalism in particular or philosophical materialism in general. Arguably, then, it was precisely here, in turning away from Hegel’s attempt to think through our relation to the world as a sacred one, that Bakunin, as a one time Left Hegelian, charted a philosophical course which foreclosed the kind of spiritually open relationship to nature that we are now so much in need of.

## CONCLUSION

We have had a good half-century of popular use of psychedelics in the west, and we did not need to wait for the resurgence of entheogenic practice in the last few decades to learn in broad terms of the kinds of experiences I have discussed here. And yet the main-

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* p.49. Miller has ‘certainty of itself. For the translation ‘certainty of oneself’ see S. Houlgate, *The Opening of Hegel’s Logic: From Being to Infinity* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University) p. 147.

<sup>47</sup> E. von der Luft, *Hegel, Hinrichs, and Schleiermacher on Feeling and Reason in Religion: The Texts of Their 1821–22 Debate* (Michigan: Edwin Mellen Press, 1987). On speculative reason as mystical see G. W. F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, Trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris, (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1991), and R. M. Wallace, *Hegel’s Philosophy of Reality, Freedom and God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) p.97.

the untutored ‘trip,’ the ‘entheogenic journey’ is explicitly oriented to the revelatory and reverential aspects of the experience, and often involves ritual, meditation and incantatory practices aimed at getting on good terms with the substance. It is broadly these kinds of intentional uses of psychoactives that seem to me most promising and that I want to consider here.

In recent decades entheogenic practices have begun to percolate back into, and be reinvented, in modern societies. Hundreds of thousands of people are undergoing the uncanny initiation into the tryptamine zone that is afforded by ayahuasca, vaporised or smoked DMT, 5-MeO-DMT and other substances. They are doing so, for the most part, without churches, without political sanction, and in a context of officially promoted cultural ignorance. The question now arises of the possible historical significance of this reencounter between the entheogens and the modern psyche. Will it remain a marginal affair, an exotic phenomenon of internationalised middle-class youth culture, sooner or later succumbing to the pincer movement of fashion and repression, or, on the contrary, could these psychoactives help to open up a new radical political project? More exactly: if it is clear by now that human survival, not to speak of human flourishing, hangs on our collective capacity to break away from global capitalism’s ecocidal dynamic,<sup>5</sup> is there a case for thinking that the entheogens could help to educate, and thereby bring into being, the political subjects who could make the break?

As soon as one considers, however, the possible educative function of the entheogens, one stumbles over a bizarre ‘supernatural’ terrain. The reports of mystics and shamans come, perhaps, closest to evoking some of what one experiences. However, the main lines of ecological thinking, whether on the left or more generally, proceed in the opposite, broadly philosophically materialist direc-

<sup>5</sup> A. Barnosky et. al, ‘Approaching a State Shift in Earth’s Biosphere’, *Nature* 486 (2012), pp.52–58.

tion.<sup>6</sup> Anything spiritual or religious is seen, if it is considered at all, as a holdover from times when we simply knew far less about how nature works. For entheogenic travellers, meanwhile, a divine dimension to human and natural being starts to seem either a certainty, or at least a fairly plausible premise. It is not uncommon for people to report feeling ecstatically at one with nature, and some go on to become active ‘partisans of the plants’. The question arises, then, as to whether the secular and atheist left, along with many others, have closed the book on Spirit prematurely.

In what follows I want to begin some modest Lockean theoretical ‘under-labouring’ for an Entheogenic Left to come. I do this by confronting the very idea of the political potential of the entheogens with what could be regarded as a famous pre-emptive refutation: Mikhail Alexandrovich Bakunin’s (1814–1876) critique of religion, God, spirituality and the supernatural. Bakunin’s standpoint on these matters, carrying the prestige of his extraordinary revolutionary activity, and expressed at a hinge point in the formation of modern political culture, continues to shape what many people take a radical left politics to entail. Humans do not begin to win their political freedom, he argued, until they emancipate themselves from ‘the phantom of God’.<sup>7</sup> In other words, political emancipation entails atheism. The problem of God is immediately the problem of human freedom, and only the negation of God opens us to our proper human dignity.

Much of the impact of this message derives from the legend of Bakunin himself—here was a man who lived his freedom! And coming in the wake of the internalisation of the Christian image of God over millennia, there is no doubt Bakunin helped both in the necessary overcoming of this image and in its transformation into a new and active image of free Human Being. But this is also

<sup>6</sup> For a good overview see D. White, A. Rudy, and B. Gareau, *Environments, Natures, and Social Theory: Towards a Critical Hybridity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2015).

<sup>7</sup> M. Bakunin, ‘Man, Society and Freedom’ (1871). [www.marxists.org](http://www.marxists.org)

straction’.<sup>42</sup> God, under this construal, is an abstract representation of all the powers, starting with nature, upon which humans find themselves dependent, which then gets mistaken by thought itself as a self-subsistent entity independent of thought. By the time we get to the later versions of the Christian God, this misrecognised projection has become the most empty possible object, a pure thing of thought thinking itself. McLaughlin, who carefully traces Bakunin’s reconstruction of the history of religion, summarises this conclusion (the internal citation is from Bakunin): ‘God, the so-called Supreme Being, is in fact the product of man’s thought, its ultimate abstraction—or more precisely, the “power of abstraction [i.e. reason] positing itself as its own object”. In other words, God is, in himself, indeterminate being, nothingness’.<sup>43</sup>

The echoes of Hegel’s understanding of God as Absolute Idea, and thence, Absolute Spirit, are audible in this passage. Hegel too argues that God is, in his most elementary determination, thought, indeed the emptiest thought; it is just that Hegel thinks the being or existence of thought in away that Bakunin does not. For Hegel, in fact, ‘indeterminate being’ or ‘nothing’ is the most elementary (that is, necessary but wholly inadequate)<sup>44</sup> concept of what is, including of the being of God. It is no threat to the existence of God, then, to conceive him as pure indeterminate being, or for that matter, ‘nothing’, since it is just this thought which, for Hegel, establishes the continuity of our certainty of our own being with our certainty of divine being.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Cited in P. McLaughlin, *Mikhail Bakunin: The Philosophical Basis of His Anarchism* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2002) p.133.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p.135.

<sup>44</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, Trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris, (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1991) pp.112, 120.

<sup>45</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel’s Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1969) pp.82–83.



the idealists wish to support their beliefs: the first is a real authentication of facts; the second is only a supposition of facts which nobody has seen, and which consequently are at variance with the experience of everybody.<sup>40</sup>

The epistemic difference the entheogens make, it should be stressed, is that faith is strictly unnecessary in order to experience the 'invisible realms'. To be sure, faith, in the sense of trust that 'this will all turn out ok' is necessary to take these mercurial substances in the first place; faith of a larger kind definitely helps in navigating them; and faith as a kind of trust that existence is ultimately good, or simply worth it, is a common, and much valued, conclusion arising from these journeys. Indeed this conclusion is but one demonstration of the fact that the ineliminably individual character of the experiences does not preclude their general or universal aspects. To the extent that one can control for dosage, physical environment, conscious intent, cultural background and psychological preparedness, over a number of journeys the external observer will gather converging reports over the nature of the altered state or spirit zone.<sup>41</sup> In sum, there most certainly is an x there to be investigated, and there are means, operationalisable to varying degrees, to illuminate this x from the outside.

It is a matter of record, of course, that as a youth Bakunin had a deeply felt religious consciousness. But it was not one that survived his later intellectualist portrait of the Christian God as essentially a matter of thought, in fact as simply 'the absolute ab-

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> On DMT see R. Strassman, *DMT: The Spirit Molecule: A Doctor's Revolutionary Research into the Biology of Near-Death and Mystical Experiences* (Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press, 2001). On ayahuasca see B. Shanon, *Antipodes of the Mind: Charting the Phenomenology of the Ayahuasca Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). On psilocybin mushrooms see R. Doblin, 'Panke's "Good Friday" Experiment: A Long Time Follow Up and Methodological Critique', *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, Vol. 23, No. 1. (1991).

where the problems begin. Bakunin conceived the relation between God and human as ultimately one of implacable opposition: 'But immediately God appears, man is reduced to nothing'.<sup>8</sup> There was, it followed, nothing divine to human beings, and 'over there,' in the experiential direction indicated by the spiritually attuned, there was nothing to be found but self-delusion.

Paul McLaughlin calls the alternative anti-theological perspective developed by Bakunin 'dialectical naturalism'.<sup>9</sup> This was a position further elaborated by Murray Bookchin, the author of *The Ecology of Freedom*, and one of the key thinkers of the twentieth century ecological movement.<sup>10</sup> It would be unfair to say that Bakunin blindly shepherded the nascent worker's movement towards the bourgeois Enlightenment mechanistic and atomistic view of nature as essentially a realm of objects of potential human use. Nonetheless, as McLaughlin and Bookchin contend, he pursued a totally desacralised image of reality, including of nature, thereby abetting, as I see it, the removal of a decisive obstacle to nature's unchecked despoliation. What is more, Bakunin helped radicalise the prototypically modern image of humans as collective self-legislators<sup>11</sup> in the very moment that he declared, along with all other atheists, that any search for the divine grounds of the human self and human freedom was an irrational atavism. In other words, Bakunin was one of the key thinkers who helped cut us all loose, culturally speaking, from the experience of the eternal, thereby generating a specifically modern way of getting lost.

It should be admitted that talk-in western left circles at any rate-of a 'divine' or 'eternal' dimension to the self, society and

<sup>8</sup> M. Bakunin, *God and the State* (1871). [dwardmac.pitzer.edu](http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu) 1.html

<sup>9</sup> P. McLaughlin, *Mikhail Bakunin: The Philosophical Basis of His Anarchism* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2002) p.33.

<sup>10</sup> M. Bookchin, *The Philosophy of Social Ecology: Essays on Dialectical Naturalism*, Second Edition (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> R. B. Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem* Second Edition (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999).

nature courts, to put it politely, incomprehension. The heavily freighted word 'God', in particular, stands like a sphinx in the way of comprehension; and yet the sphinx guards the zone we need to investigate. Below I will emphasise that all one need grant words like 'God' or 'divine' or 'eternal' or 'spiritual' is that they are names for powerful and in some cases rationally credible experiences, the ontological status of which is a source of perpetual—if sometimes productive—dispute. My arguments are not, therefore, directed against any approach, including possible versions of atheism and materialism, which attends to these phenomena and their causal effects, and which is willing to engage in non-question begging interrogation of 'knowledge' imparted in these experiences. It is simply the naivete of the declaration that there is 'nothing there' worth thinking about that I want to dispute.

All the same, between the case for 'the spiritual' presented here and 'the materialist' presuppositions and socio-historical preoccupations of the dominant tradition of left politics, there seems to fall what Lyotard called a 'differend': an absence of mutually agreeable criteria by which to judge the veracity of the claims each side makes.<sup>12</sup> Reciprocal condescension is the order of the day. In this respect the entheogens, however, are extremely interesting. They stand as a 'third thing': a mysterious nexus of biochemistry and 'supernatural' experience. On the one hand they constitute an evident 'material' cause, namely specific neuro-chemically active molecules in specific quantities. These can in principle be observed—by a third person observer with technological amplification—triggering determinate processes at certain receptor sites in the brain and elsewhere in the body. On the other hand, the conjunction of human being and molecule reliably and promptly causes first person experience to explode

<sup>12</sup> J. P. Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

of Mesoamerica?<sup>37</sup> An idle counterfactual, perhaps, but enough to show up the unconscious parochialism of Bakunin's atheism. In any event, once the simple question of personal experience is allowed into the conversation something less obvious comes to the fore: this God that Bakunin does not believe in is already a God who is a matter of mere 'belief'.

While the root of all the absurdities that torment the world, belief in God, remains intact, it will never fail to bring forth new offspring.<sup>38</sup>

The belief in God, pure spirit and creator of the world, and the belief in the immateriality of the soul remained untouched. This double belief became the ideal basis of the whole Occidental and Oriental civilization of Europe; it penetrated and became incarnate in all the institutions, all the details of the public and private life of all classes, and the masses as well.<sup>39</sup>

'Belief' or 'faith', indeed faith interpreted in the intellectualist terms of belief: these were the categories, widely accepted by theist and atheist alike, pertaining to the claimed existence of God as much as to his claimed non-existence. These are still the terms in which debates about the existence of God are generally conducted. For an Enrique, a Stan or a Daniel, meanwhile, issues of belief are entirely secondary to the astonishing things they have undergone.

In a footnote to *God and the State*, Bakunin makes a correlative distinction between experience and faith, reserving the former only for science:

Universal experience, on which all science rests, must be clearly distinguished from universal faith, on which

<sup>37</sup> P. T. Furst, *Flesh of the Gods: The Ritual Use of Hallucinogens*, (New York: Praeger 1972).

<sup>38</sup> M. Bakunin, *God and the State* (1871). [dwardmac.pitzer.edu](http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu)

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

of reconnecting to nature as a divine or spiritual realm evidenced above.

In Bakunin's case, materialistic atheism was fundamentally pre-conditioned by the image of God he took himself to be rejecting. The writings after the mid-1860s gave expression to the conviction that militant atheism and the struggle against oppression and exploitation go hand in hand. The credo of this position is well known:

The first revolt is against the supreme tyranny of theology, of the phantom of God. As long as we have a master in heaven, we will be slaves on earth. Our reason and our will will be equally annulled. As long as we believe that we must unconditionally obey—and vis a vis God, no other obedience is possible—we must of necessity passively submit, without the least reservation, to the holy authority of his consecrated and unconsecrated agents.<sup>36</sup>

It is impossible to read Bakunin's writings from this period without sympathy for the justified brutality of his evisceration of authoritarian and obscurantist religion. All the same, Bakunin, to put it plainly, makes the almost universal leftist atheist mistake of seeing the very idea of God, any possible God, as in itself tyrannical, whereas the root of the association of (Abrahamic) religion with tyranny arguably lies rather in its attempt to substitute itself and its ideas about 'the word of God' for a responsibility to promote each person's opening onto the numinous.

Unconditional obedience, slavery, tyranny... What might this courageous thinker have made of 'God,' by contrast, if he had partaken, say, of peyote, or peyotl, the 3,4,5-trimethoxyphenethylamine containing 'divine messenger' of the Nahuatl speaking peoples

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<sup>36</sup> M. Bakunin, 'Man, Society and Freedom' (1871). [www.marxists.org/ciety.htm](http://www.marxists.org/ciety.htm)

through the noetic frame which unconsciously codetermines the contemporary western materialist world picture, together with the kinds of objects, modes of perception, and forms of understanding that frame is pleased to recognise.

Most philosophical materialists-physicalists-naturalists, of course, have ready-made conceptual boxes within which to put first person reports of such experiences ('hallucinations', 'delusions', 'subjective projections', and so forth). In other words, reductive materialists 'already know' that nothing from these quarters can disturb their dogmatic slumbers, since they 'already know' that these are nothing but 'subjective phenomena' whose sufficient explication is to be sought at some 'lower,' 'harder,' 'objective' (third person observable) level, and, moreover, they are quite sure they already know what 'subjective' means. The entheogen enthusiast, meanwhile, could retort that, as use of these molecules is subject to taboo and, in many cases, judicial repression and incarceration, the materialist is actually living and thinking inside a 'matrix' of experience whose boundaries are patrolled by the capitalist state. This, at least for radicals, ought to be enough of a provocation. But sadly, if it is not, there remains only to try to speak of these experiences, and hope for open minds.

In what follows I consider first what could be called an experience of the 'divine'. This material is, I think, difficult to assimilate to a standard philosophically materialist, secular atheist perspective. In the second section I present two examples where entheogens have affected people's appreciation of the living world. Following this material we should be in a better position to assess some of Bakunin's well-known denunciations of God and religion, and to consider whether it might not be time to shrug off this nineteenth-century atheism and open ourselves to a more spiritually informed appreciation of nature and reality in general.

## ‘TE AMO! TE AMO! TE AMO!..’.

I begin with excerpts from my written interview of 19 December, 2015, with Enrique, a Mexican man in his thirties with a law degree who earns his living as an Uber driver.<sup>13</sup> Enrique smoked the venom of *Bufo alvarius*, the Sonoran Desert Toad, on an afternoon in April 2015, in Guadalajara. The primary active components of the toad venom are the tryptamine alkaloids 5-MeO-DMT and 5-HO-DMT (bufotenin). 5-MeO-DMT, like N,N-DMT (generally referred to simply as ‘DMT’) to be discussed below, is an endogenous neurotransmitter only a few biochemical steps away from the essential amino acid tryptophan. Smoking the toad venom leads to a spike in 5-MeO-DMT, with acute effects lasting around seven to twenty minutes, though reverberations and powerful ‘flashbacks’ may occur for many months afterwards.

In early 2015 Enrique went into rehab for an ice addiction. He succeeded in getting off ice, but put on twenty-five kilos, substituting food for the drug he was still craving. Then, through a friend who he describes as both a ‘brother’ and a ‘shaman’, he had an opportunity to take ‘the toad medicine’. One dose—in fact one breath—was enough. He now considers himself totally cured.

Apart from mentioning that he was attended to throughout by a ‘shaman’ who sang and used rattles over his prone body, I omit the external ritualistic aspects of Enrique’s journey, so as to concentrate on the inner phenomenology. The journey itself fell into five distinct stages.

A few seconds after inhaling, Enrique’s body crumpled where he stood. He was let down to the ground by the shaman. On the inside he felt as if he was flying at extreme velocity, and, as he said, ‘all dialogue with my mind and body stopped’. Later he could recall,

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<sup>13</sup> This interview material and the material to follow comes from participant observation and interview-based research I have been conducting with western users of entheogens since 2012, focused on Australia and Amazonian Peru. Approximately forty interviews have been conducted so far.

older Bakunin stamped his authority on now stand in the way, culturally and psychologically, of efforts to oppose corporate ecocide? Put more generally, in what sense do the kinds of assumptions built into contemporary leftist atheism block the formation of political movements able to speak for a radically transformed human relation to the natural world?

In summary, the answer I want to propose is that proudly insensible to spiritual, religious or even just psychonautical experiences, contemporary atheism helps maintain the psychological and cultural reality of a purely external and objectivist image of nature. Bakunin’s specific brand of Aristotelian-developmental materialism<sup>33</sup> is not at issue here, nor the historical and intellectual reasons that led him from his earlier critical Hegelian desire for a ‘really democratic and universally human religion of freedom,’<sup>34</sup> to the later staunchly atheist positions made most famous in *God and the State* (1871). Nor will I try to make the case, though it is probably true, that Bakunin was animated throughout his entire life by a transformed Christ identification—in other words, that his revolutionary atheism was infused with a passion and a direction whose archetype was the Christian God.<sup>35</sup> It is rather the way Bakunin’s atheism has promoted not so much any specific alternative materialist or physicalist philosophy, as a general leftist consensus concerning the range and boundaries of the ‘real world,’ that concerns me here. This is explicitly a real world which does not contain anything divine or spiritual. For the secular left the forest may not be ‘mere timber’, but neither is it a ‘sacred grove’. This is a version of the ‘real world’ with no place for the existentially profound modes

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<sup>33</sup> See P. McLaughlin, *Mikhail Bakunin: The Philosophical Basis of His Anarchism* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2002), p.108.

<sup>34</sup> M. Bakunin, ‘The Reaction in Germany,’ in A. Lehning (ed.), *Mikhail Bakunin: Selected Writings* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973) p.50.

<sup>35</sup> See for example, M. Bakunin ‘From a Letter of Bakunin to His Sisters’, in A. Lehning (ed.), *Mikhail Bakunin: Selected Writings* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973) p.34–35.

should be cultivated, argued about, struggled for? Who is to say how much we could learn, what data we might gather, what technologies we might invent, if modern science were allowed to test itself in these waters? What would become of the ecological sciences in particular if scientists were up to the challenge of entering these realms hitherto reserved for shamans? Would they not give birth to a loving cognition of the world beyond anything pre-modern shamans could have conceived of? What, more generally, will such experiences add to ‘environmental consciousness’ as they become more widespread? And how else might these substances help as social conflicts sharpen? Or should one discard all this yet again as ‘merely subjective,’ and fall back on the reassurance given to itself by ‘scientific consciousness’ that it has outgrown infantile superstitions concerning ‘the spirit world’? In the light of innumerable experiences like the ones just reported this kind of prejudicial response is far from genuinely scientific. Rather it is a confession of impoverishment by the spiritually dispossessed. Denied what many pre-modern cultures had already discovered, namely reliable ways of entering and navigating within the gargantuan ‘internal exteriority’ of the numinous,<sup>32</sup> it amounts to mistaking its spiritual deafness for a sign of maturity.

## UN/BELIEF IN GOD

It is against this background, that we should reopen for consideration the legacy of nineteenth century atheism in the form given to it by Bakunin. The question that concerns me here is the following: In what sense does the atheist cultural current that the

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<sup>32</sup> I intend ‘numinous’ as including other states such as shamanic ecstasis and mystic union, rather than limited to experiences of the wholly other, as in Rudolf Otto’s use of the term. R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

however, the general outlines of what followed. ‘The first “place” the medicine took me to,’ he reported, ‘was my lower vibration, my rancour, egoism, need, envy, and negativity’. Here, in what he later called this ‘hell,’ he became spontaneously aware that his ice addiction had its source in painful memories he had been trying to evade for many years and which were the source of much resentment.

This sort of spontaneous ‘knowing’, as many people can attest, occurs commonly on psychedelics, and is particularly a feature of the tryptamines. It is as if a cramped, habitual repression, which long ago became part of one’s character, is suddenly set aside. When this veil of characterological fear lifts, an understanding emerges, a ‘wise message’ received from somewhere beyond, from out of a darkness invisible to the lighthouse of the ordinary mind. One is reminded in such moments of Allan Watts’ only half-facetious quip about what T am: ‘The sensation which corresponds to the feeling of “I” is a chronic muscular tension in the body’.<sup>14</sup>

The third moment in Enrique’s journey was a complete loss of this personal T. An ‘ego death’, to use the familiar lingo. As he put it: ‘I let go, let go, let go, of everything that, in my mind, I thought I was—my intelligence, my ego, my resentments, my complexes, my whole conception of myself as a human’.

And then, fourthly, came the ascent and culmination, to what was obviously the curative moment:

I started to climb up through different levels—over ten less than twenty—and my brother [the shaman] arrived in the centre of my existence. I began to experience feelings I didn’t believe were compatible with a physical body, an immense expansion of my being, and a light, something like a giant star, came to me and allowed me to fuse with it, and I felt LOVE, ABSOLUTE

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<sup>14</sup> A. Watts, *Still the Mind: An Introduction to Meditation* (Novato, California: New World Library, 2000) p.88.

and INFINITE, PEACE, PLENITUDE, an interminable orgasm that came not from my genitals but from my heart, my soul.

Following this climax, Enrique was gradually returned to the starting point, but transfigured, the ordinary world with its discrete phenomena now suffused with the infinite beauty of that 'other place':

The intensity began to decrease a little and I felt the vibration in me of the sacred songs and, I assume, the energy of my guide—who had always been very present in the experience as something like perfect geometry: infinite, sacred, lovely, beautiful, unimaginable, the ongoing generation of infinite beauty. And then the first thing I heard with my mind, with the senses, was a 'Fuck me!'<sup>15</sup> and a 'everything, everything, everything'.

Enrique shared the video with me of what he called his 'healing'. For most of seventeen minutes he can be seen lying on the grass, mostly immobile except for some premature efforts to get up a few minutes in. We only get an indication of what he has been going through at the end, when he starts screaming, as loud as a person can, and without let up until his voice is gone: 'Te amo! Te amo! Te amo!...' (I love you! I love you! I love you!...).<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Here Enrique uses the untranslatable phrase *eso chingado*. This is from the verb *chingar*, whose basic meaning is to hit, fuck, violate but which has numerous forms in Mexican Spanish. I render it as 'Fuck me!' because Enrique uses the grammatically masculine but semantically feminine form of the word. As Octavio Paz explains in his famous discussion of *chingar*: 'The "chingado" is the passive, inert, open, opposed to the one who does the act of "chinga" that is active, aggressive and closed. The "chingon" is the male, the one who opens. The "chingada" is the female, the pure passive, unarmed'. See O. Paz, *El Laberinto de la Soledad* (Madrid: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1992) p.32.

<sup>16</sup> This moment, I am bound to say, is very moving. His partner is holding the camera and you can hear her sobbing as she listens to these exulted cries.

the taste of rotting fish breath, none of which was abhorrent or anything, it just was. And it dawned on me that I was a shark. I was just swimming slowly through the ocean, feeling this power and grace and sharkness that was so intense because it was so real. It was as real as anything, as any other experience. And that probably lasted about a minute, and then I became aware that I was standing on the bridge again, dripping with water.

How is an experience like this to be assimilated? Daniel's further thoughts are revealing:

It was a very grounding experience, because to perceive the world from the eyes of another being, especially an animal, was quite amazing, and to realise the different frequencies of consciousness. It was like a different tuning rather than a different intelligence. There was an extreme intelligence, but it was a different type of intelligence. And I've experienced that with plants, like tuning into a tree. But what it does, it really connects you to the overall intelligence that runs through all of nature, through all living beings. And I think humans get caught up in the idea that it has to be centred around an organ like the brain, so they can't see plants or fish or rocks as intelligent—because where's their brain?!... But being able to see that intelligence is actually a field that everything is plugged into was extremely sobering and connecting for me.

Rather than provide further examples, I simply ask: Are these experiences not exactly the revelation of reconnection without sacrifice of freedom unconsciously craved and desperately needed by techno-capitalist humanity? The kind of revelation which

wardness of life'.<sup>30</sup> The difference from ordinary sensibility is striking. How comparatively external is our usual routinised relationship to reality! And this goes also for the Sunday stroll in the park. Stan's description should be amplified here by recalling the words of Sam Harris, the well-known 'militant atheist'. 'It is one thing', he writes, referring to normal consciousness, 'to be awestruck by the sight of a giant redwood and to be amazed at the details of its history and underlying biology. It is quite another [while using psychedelics] to spend an apparent eternity in egoless communion with it'.<sup>31</sup>

Themes of communion and interiority are signatures of experiences on the entheogens. Daniel, an Australian in his late forties originally from South Africa, gave me the following account while we sat in the kitchen of his innovative biotechnology farm. One Amazonian sunrise, after an all-night yage (ayahuasca) ceremony with a Peruvian shaman, he went down to the river to bathe.

I was standing on this little wooden bridge... And I poured the bucket of water over my head, and it was amazing because it was like joining an electrical circuit. I instantaneously became connected to all water everywhere. I had a feeling of being connected to everything that was touching the water. Which seemed like all of life, but, you know, all fishes, and then trees and plants, everything that was touching water. But I ended up following one channel down and I became a shark. I was moving through the water, but I didn't know I was a shark. All I had was the sensation of swaying backwards and forwards, the ocean coming towards me, you know, things moving towards me. I could feel my gills, I could smell inside

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<sup>30</sup> H. Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1911) p.141

<sup>31</sup> S. Harris, 'Drugs and the Meaning of Life', 5 July, 2011, [www.samharris.org](http://www.samharris.org)

The spiritual topography in Enrique's account closely resembles that of the three worlds cosmology (Underworld, Earth, Heaven), we see in numerous traditional cultures, including the Americas, and which is given form in the Judeo-Christian tradition and in the work of European visionaries such as Dante, Swedenborg, Blake and Huxley. This topography is personalised, taking on some of the features of a shamanic initiation. First there is surrender, a loss of ordinary coordinates, and a threshold is crossed into another state. Then comes an Orphic descent into a psychic underworld, into 'hell'. In some people who smoke the toad venom, I should note, this descent is attenuated or absent, replaced simply by a kind of energetic take-off, whereas in some few others it is amplified to terrifying proportions. In Enrique's case the descent is followed by a transitional stage of personal obliteration, and then ascent to the heavenly empyrean. What approaches as external, transcendent, at this point becomes, at the same time, immanent: Enrique's being expands immensely and he fuses, literally, with the light and the love, which arrives like a 'giant star'. Crucially, and in a revelation frequently found in testimonies from 'toadsters,' as well as from users of other psychoactives like ayahuasca, there is also a moment reminiscent of Platonic anamnesis, for as Enrique told me, he recalled being there before, that it was home: 'I remembered that I had been in that "place," that I come from there and belong there'.<sup>17</sup>

It remains only to report that Enrique is now helping to introduce other people to the toad medicine, has himself journeyed one more time, and may be travelling to Europe with his shaman brother on a toad medicine tour. A year later he writes:

I have not ceased to feel that Love and Infinite Gratitude. The addiction for me is just a memory. I live in total freedom, harmony and gratitude. I am not perfect, but I am conscious of my luminosity, and I am

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<sup>17</sup> Plato, *Phaedo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

immensely happy because I have decided: I am Love, Awareness, Responsibility.

The main point to stress from the foregoing, I think, would be the implausibility of any scientifically reductive ('materialist', 'naturalist', or 'physicalist') attempt to account for Enrique's liberation from his ice addiction. To be sure, we deal here with an intense neurophysiological response to certain alkaloids which reliably give rise to experiences broadly recognisable as experiences of a certain 'type' across diverse populations.<sup>18</sup> This broad replicability of outcome is of great interest. However, to a large degree the healing properties of Enrique's journey inhere, I think we must admit, in the existential and metaphysical profundity of the experience, and the understandings and decisions ('I have decided') arising within and from the experience. The felt profundity, in turn, derives from transpersonal or 'absolute' qualities which are so intense as to merit descriptions that are more familiar when applied to God, or the rapture of saints, or reports from bodhisattvas.<sup>19</sup>

There are now hundreds of 'toad testimonials' scattered in various sites around the internet.<sup>20</sup> Evidently, on a breakthrough dose the toad venom does something to the seat of personal consciousness, to the point of view from which everything is known and felt. This is clearly a neuro-chemical effect. Perhaps we shall one day learn that, among other things, it decreases right parietal lobe activity, leading to a sense of 'selflessness'.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, 'objec-

<sup>18</sup> J. Oroc, *Tryptamine Palace: 5-MeO-DMT and the Sonoran Desert Toad* (Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press, 2009); M. W. Ball, *Being Human: An Entheological Guide to God, Evolution and the Fractal Energetic Nature of Reality* (Kyandara Publishing, 2009); R. Metzner, *The Toad and the Jaguar: A Field Report of Underground Research on a Visionary Medicine: Bufo alvarius and 5-Methoxy-Dimethyltryptamine* (Berkeley: Regent Press, 2013).

<sup>19</sup> See for example, J. B. Hollenback, *Mysticism: Experience, Response, and Empowerment* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

<sup>20</sup> See for example [www.dmt-nexus.me](http://www.dmt-nexus.me).

<sup>21</sup> B. Johnstone; A. Bodling; D. Cohen; S. E. Christ; A. Wegrzyn, 'Right Parietal Lobe-Related "Selflessness" as the Neuropsychological Basis of Spiritual Tran-

stop believing in trees, roots, and radicles'.<sup>27</sup> Readers versed in Deleuze and Guattari might well have nodded in agreement at this bold idea. But how many, before doing so, ever experienced something like Stan's becoming-tree? In fact, those who easily repeat this kind of critique ('tree thinking' promotes hierarchy, duality, metaphysical ideas of transcendence, and so on), probably spend very little time with trees. They have likely become insensible to the experiential ground of the tradition being critiqued. Urban life, in fact, eventually made it possible to gain enough distance from nature to critique the tree as a common model of hierarchical thinking, while making the earlier treatment of the tree as devotional object, as model of the self, as cosmovision (the World Tree of so many cultures), or as metonym of life (the Tree of Life), all but unfathomable.<sup>28</sup>

Would it be 'ironic' if, as seems probable, Deleuze and Guattari stumbled on the limits of the tree metaphor while on mescaline or some other psychedelic?<sup>29</sup> Not especially, and not only because these philosophers just substituted another plant image ('rhizomes') for that of the tree. Psychedelics make all kinds of thought possible, even if some kinds are more probable. In any event, far from going in deep enough to see a realm beyond the tree metaphor, most urbanites, and even those who have taken the odd and probably party dose of LSD, never arrive at the experiential root of the tree metaphor.

Stan's becoming-tree could perhaps be more productively referred to Henri Bergson's characterisation of intuition as that self-conscious form of instinct which transports us into 'the very in-

<sup>27</sup> G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaux: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004) p. 15.

<sup>28</sup> For a mechanical engineering attempt to recall us to the tree metaphor as a universal law of natural and social design, see A. Bejan and J. P. Zane, *Design in Nature* (New York: Random House, 2012).

<sup>29</sup> A. Powell, *Deleuze, Altered States and Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007) pp.54–97.



material substance,' variously identified as 'consciousness, the Godhead, the Ground of Being, or the Fountain of Life'.<sup>26</sup>

Alongside these global intuitions, it is also common to find dramatic cases of empathic identification with, or psychic possession by, other species. These, I think, are very suggestive of the 'ecological potential' of certain entheogens. Here are a couple of illustrations from my research into users of ayahuasca.

Stan is an Australian man in his mid-forties with a military background and a long-term meditative practice. Eventually, after battling unsuccessfully with PTSD and being hospitalised, he made substantial improvements to his mental health using a number of entheogens. He is now dedicated in various ways to helping with, as he puts it, 'the evolution of human consciousness'. At one point in our discussions, he related the beginning of his first ayahuasca journey. To begin with, plasticky patterns began to form in front of his eyes. In response he formed the intention of changing the appearance of the patterns into wood, that is, of making them appear woody. Suddenly, as he did so:

A voice said to me, 'Not power over. At one with'... So then, when I tried to be at one with the experience, all of a sudden the experience changed, and I found myself inside a tree... I was literally standing inside a tree trunk. I travelled up the tree trunk right up to the very top of the tree. And it was a pine tree. It was almost like I was the tree. I went right out to where the pine needles were in the sunshine. And I could feel the sunshine on the pine needles. And it felt so good! Oh my God! And I remember thinking: 'No wonder plants reach up for the sun, coz it is so good!'

In this context I recall Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's radically anti-authoritarian assertion: 'We're tired of trees. We should

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. pp. 163–164.

tivity', 'critical distance', and 'scepticism' get exposed in this state—it is the very nature of the experience—as psychological ruses by which one tries to keep out of play the 'place' from which one ordinarily thinks. A mighty storm descends to blow open the mind's eye. This is an event of the total personality. Among western users of 5-MeO-DMT in either synthetic or naturally occurring forms, references are sometimes made to Hindu and Buddhist concepts such as 'samadhi' and 'non-duality,' though invariably with an emphasis on the tremendous energies unleashed in these states. Drawing on the modern western tradition of self-consciously rational thought we might well describe it as an event of the 'absolute,' for the closest we come in the modern west to an effort to think through the philosophical implications of something comparable is the discussion of the absolute in German classical romanticism and idealism.<sup>22</sup>

Apart from the biochemical, then, and setting aside the contextual factors (cultural, ideational, local environment, prior motivations, and so forth), we have two intertwined aspects of this first person experience of the absolute, which we can tentatively designate as the phenomenological and the existential. In the first place, as just emphasised, there emerges a field of experience for which philosophically materialist atheists are prepared neither conceptually nor attitudinally; a field calling for capitalised words like Infinity, Eternity, Non-duality, and Divine Love. In the second place, how the person 'subjectivises' this stormy absolute is an irreducible determinant of how the experience unfolds. That is, the bodily, emotional, cognitive and existential attitude they sustain towards it and its internal stages (do they resist, can they, on the

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scendence,' *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, Vol. 22 Issue 4 (Oct-Dec 2012) pp.267–284.

<sup>22</sup> M. Baur, 'From Kant's Highest Good to Hegel's Absolute Knowing,' in S. Houlgate and M. Baur eds. *A Companion to Hegel* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2011); D. Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute: Being and Knowing in Early German Romantic Philosophy 1795–1804* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

contrary, keep 'letting it happen', and so forth), codetermines the felt quality, significance, personal truth-value, and ongoing reverberations of the biochemically generated but phenomenologically infinite experience. And so on, in a recursive loop, where the 'place' (the 'I') from which the existential attitude is happening is itself being broken open by the phenomenal dimension of the biochemical process.

At the least, then, what one needs to account for is that people can and do have experiences whose intensity and quality of 'absolute truth' seem to be proportional to the extent to which they punctually abandon not only whatever version of Husserl's 'natural attitude' they typically inhabit, but also the methodological standpoint of scientific or critical objectivity.<sup>23</sup> And since the experience does not refer to anything empirical (the absolute is not an empirical object, and can only be described with analogies such as 'a giant star'), truth claims arising from it, or pertaining to it, are not persuasively dispatched simply by referring them back to the ostensible neurophysiological causes of the experience.

## INSIDE NATURE

Interestingly, the issue of spirituality or divinity readily shifts to another feature of certain entheogenic compounds, at least for modern urbanites with secular materialist assumptions: they commonly provoke a transformed conception of the human relation to other living beings. At one level this is global, having to do with the kind of metaphysical construal of the world typically elicited by the experiences. James Kent, author of *Psychedelic Information Theory*, and himself a debunker of 'mystical' interpretations of drug-

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<sup>23</sup> Also translated as 'natural standpoint,' see E. Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (London: Routledge, 2002) p.49–59; E. G. d'Aquili and A. B. Newberg, *The Mystical Mind: Probing the Biology of Religious Experience* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

induced states, nevertheless writes of the powerful neurotransmitter DMT when it is vapourised and inhaled:

And when you get to the heart of what the typical DMT message is, it is usually something about the environment or living systems or the vast plant consciousness that penetrates our world. The "Gaia consciousness" that infuses the experience is undeniable, and what to make of that I don't know, other than to entertain the possibility that this ancient plant consciousness actually exists and is attempting to make itself known through the DMT-enlightened mammal brain.<sup>24</sup>

Kent perhaps exaggerates the case here, since technophilic, 'alien' and 'Promethean' themes are also common features of smoked or vaporised DMT journeys. Be that as it may, a Gaian or Mother Earth archetype is an even more common component of journeys on ayahuasca or yage, an orally-active plant brew employed by many indigenous peoples in the Amazon, and which usually contains DMT as its primary visionary component. In fact, at the level of basic metaphysical message, there appears to be remarkable cross-cultural agreement by a large number of contemporary users of ayahuasca. In the 1990s, the psychologist Benny Shanon carried out a study of the phenomenology of the ayahuasca experience which, drawing on questionnaires with people who cumulatively had taken the brew around 2500 times, remains the most thorough analysis to date.<sup>25</sup> Shanon describes the most common metaphysical theory favoured by users regardless of cultural background as 'idealistic monism with pantheistic overtones,' or the idea that reality is 'constituted by one, non-

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<sup>24</sup> [www.breakingopenthehead.com](http://www.breakingopenthehead.com)

<sup>25</sup> B. Shanon, *Antipodes of the Mind: Charting the Phenomenology of the Ayahuasca Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) pp.44, 410.