

# The Psychedelic Experience: A New Perspective, a New Attitude Towards the World<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** I provide a philosophical account of the potential of the psychedelic experience to treat depression. My main thesis is that such a potential lies in the possibility of psychedelics allowing us to experience a world diametrically opposed to that of depression. I take the psychedelic experience to be world-shifting. By building on Ludwig Wittgenstein's insights and notions of aesthetics, ethics, and mysticism, I characterize the world in depression as a world devoid of beauty and meaning, from which we feel disconnected. I then argue that the psychedelic experience immerses us in a world full of beauty and meaning, to which we feel connected. It is by changing our perspective that our whole world and attitude towards it changes, opening up new possibilities for action, as well as a new evaluation of the contingencies of our biographical self and our relationships with others.

**Keywords:** depression, psychedelics, psychedelic therapy, existential shift, beauty, meaning, connectedness, oneness, Wittgenstein

In this psychedelic renaissance we are witnessing, one of the most promising therapeutic applications of such peculiar drugs is the treatment of depression and anxiety, remarkably in their most severe forms (Muttoni et al., 2019); although psychedelic therapy is also showing promising results in the treatment of several other conditions, such as addiction and eating disorders (Carhart-Harris and Goodwin 2017; Rucker, Iliff, and Nutt 2018). As the evidence on the therapeutic potential of the psychedelic experience grows, so do the hypotheses about the mechanisms by which its action might be exerted. Both traditionally and currently, the mystical quality of the psychedelic experience has enjoyed a central place in literature (Pahnke 1963; Pahnke and Richards 1966; Griffiths et al. 2006; Griffiths et al. 2008; Johnson et al. 2019). In this regard, experiencing what is known as *Oceanic Boundlessness* (Parsons, 1999) — which encompasses four classical factors of mysticism, i.e. insightfulness, a blissful state, experience of unity, and experience of spirituality — has been found to be a predictor of a positive therapeutic outcome in depression (Roseman et al., 2018). However, several other aspects of the experience are also starting to gain a prominent place in our understanding of psychedelic therapy: e.g. experiencing an emotional breakthrough (Roseman et al., 2019), having feelings of connection and acceptance (Watts et al. 2017; Carhart-Harris, Erritzoe, et al. 2018), or changing self-representation (Amada et al., 2020; Letheby, 2021).

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My intention here is to contribute to this endeavor by undertaking a philosophical approach, drawing on the works of Ludwig Wittgenstein.<sup>2</sup> Although, as I mentioned, psychedelic therapy is useful in treating different conditions, I mainly focus on depression. Particularly, I explore the therapeutic potential of the shift in perspective and attitude towards the world enabled by psychedelics. My first task in this chapter is thus to show the importance of the notion of *world* in depression. I then outline a Wittgensteinian framework to address it, and argue that patients' narratives show characteristic perspectives and attitudes towards the world. Next, I employ this same framework to compare the world in depression to that of the psychedelic experience. I contend that the therapeutic potential of the psychedelic experience lies in it enabling us to experience a world diametrically opposed to that of depression; i.e. a beautiful and meaningful world, to which we feel united.

Now, before proceeding, one caveat: although I believe that the notion of world is useful in shedding light on the psychedelic experience and its benefits, I do not believe that the exact ways in which I portray here how the world is experienced under psychedelic influence are the only possible ones, nor must they always be present for the experience to be beneficial. In my view, the psychedelic experience is multi-faceted, and we may possibly not find a *single* feature that accounts for its quality and outcome. Furthermore, there may not even be a *single set* of features that invariably account for them. The concept of *family resemblance* is useful here: although no feature is regarded as essential — no feature is shared by *all* therapeutic psychedelic experiences — they do all resemble each other by sharing one or another feature.

### **1. The world, covered in dust**

Despite the fact that people suffering from depression often mention their outlook on the world in their narratives, our current diagnostic criteria for this mental condition fail to acknowledge its relevance. Recognition of this aspect was common in psychiatry in the pre-DSM-III era. Unfortunately, it has not made it into the DSM or ICD (Kendler, 2016).

Reports such as the following are common in the experience of depression:

I remember a time when I was very young — 6 or less years old. The world seemed so large and full of possibilities. It seemed brighter and prettier. Now I feel that the world is small. That I could go anywhere and do anything and nothing for me would change. (Ratcliffe, 2015, p. 67)

In depression, the meaninglessness of every enterprise and every emotion, the meaninglessness of life itself, becomes self-evident. The only feeling left in this loveless state is insignificance. Life is fraught with sorrows: no matter what we do, we will in the end die; we are, each of us, held in the solitude of an autonomous body. (Solomon, 2001, p. 15)

The world had lost its welcoming quality. It wasn't a habitable earth any longer. It didn't bear the meaning of human life anymore. It wasn't a place where human beings could dwell. It became impossible to know how to relate to it. (Hornstein, 2009, p. 212)

These passages seek to convey how the world is perceived in depression. In this sense, they are not about specific contents or objects; they are about a way of experiencing, they attempt

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted, however, that it is not my intention to offer a detailed analysis of Wittgenstein's philosophy in this chapter. I will only introduce those aspects which, in my view, are useful in giving a philosophical account of the therapeutic potential of the psychedelic experience.

to talk about one's point of view.<sup>3</sup> I would suggest that the need to talk about how one perceives the world is motivated by a change in perspective. The idea that depression involves a change in perspective is very much present in Ratcliffe's work on the phenomenology of depression (2015). For him, the notion of world is crucial to understanding the experience of depression as well as subjective experience in general. The point is that the world is so fundamental to our everyday experience that we do not even notice it. In depression, however, the world becomes salient because there is a shift in our experience, "a unitary shift in 'how one finds oneself in the world'" (Ratcliffe, 2015, p. 32).<sup>4</sup> In my view, Wittgenstein is very much pointing to the same issue when he writes the following:

The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something — because it is always before one's eyes.) The real foundations of his enquiry do not strike a man at all. Unless *that* fact has at some time struck him. — And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful. (PI §129)

Although Wittgenstein is talking here about "things" and "facts," I think this remark may well apply to the world. We are so used to experiencing the world, to being in it, to always having it before our eyes, that it only becomes salient when we suddenly find ourselves to be in — or to look from — a different perspective. This same idea can also be found in the following entry from Wittgenstein's personal diaries:

A human being lives his ordinary life with the illumination of a light of which he is not aware until it is extinguished. Once it is extinguished, life is suddenly deprived of all value, meaning, or whatever one wants to say. One suddenly becomes aware that mere existence — as one would like to say — is in itself still completely empty, bleak. It is as if the sheen was wiped away from all things, [everything is dead ... One has then died alive. Or rather: this is the real death that one can fear].<sup>5</sup> (PPO 198–199)

We are not aware of the light in which we see the world until it is extinguished, until our perspective shifts. When this happens (for the worse), the value and meaning of life vanish; the world is dead and one has died alive, since "The world and life are one" (TLP 5.621) and "I am my world" (TLP 5.63). No doubt Wittgenstein was a tormented thinker. His personal diaries and letters reflect the anguish that often beset him — sometimes described as depression: "I am depressed but in a glowering way" (PPO 226). Furthermore, he felt at the

<sup>3</sup> A clarifying note: in talking thus about the world, according to Wittgenstein, one would be talking *nonsense*. Note that this is not pejorative, but refers to the difference that Wittgenstein draws between what can be *said* and what can only be *shown*. These passages, therefore, would be trying to say in words that which can only be shown — hence speaking nonsense. I do not want to neglect this issue, but I will not go into it here because I do not think that it is necessary for my purposes, or that I should commit myself to it.

<sup>4</sup> Regarding the idea of depression involving a shift — an *existential* shift, it is worth mentioning the work of Cecily Whiteley (2021), who aims to provide a naturalistic framework to account for the phenomenology of depression. In Whiteley's view, depression is a disorder of consciousness, and what accounts for such a shift is the departure from a state of wakefulness to enter a distinctive depressive state of consciousness. To understand depression, therefore, we must not look at the level of the contents of consciousness, but at the global state of consciousness — and the same goes for the psychedelic experience, which is also characterized as a distinctive state of global consciousness. I fully agree that what is relevant in both depression and the psychedelic experience has little to do, in this sense, with specific contents — one must, therefore, choose the appropriate level for explanations. I stand aside, however, with respect to whether the shift experienced is ultimately explained as a change in the global state of consciousness. I take, though, the ideas I develop here to be compatible with such a view.

<sup>5</sup> Text in square brackets is crossed out in Wittgenstein's manuscript.

mercy of sudden shifts in his worldview. This was both a significant source of anxiety and a chance to look at the world from a different perspective and realize what is usually taken for granted (Citron, 2018): “We don’t know that we are standing on a high and narrow rock & around us chasms in which everything looks completely different” (PPO 140). Our perspective on the world is fragile, it only takes a small shift to make everything look completely different. And when everything looks completely different, it is our world that has changed. In the depression, we no longer look at the world from a high rock: we look at it from within a chasm.

Before exploring such a chasm further, let me introduce in a little more detail the Wittgensteinian framework on which I will build to address it. The point I want to make is that depression involves a particular aesthetic-ethical perspective and attitude towards the world. To understand this point, it will be necessary to approach aesthetics and ethics in Wittgenstein's philosophy. In the following lines, I will try and provide the necessary elements to grasp what I am seeking to convey, though I hope my point will become clearer as the chapter progresses.

### 1.1. A Wittgensteinian frame

What is ethics, according to Wittgenstein? “Ethics is the enquiry into what is valuable, or, into what is really important [...] Ethics is the enquiry into the meaning of life, or into what makes life worth living, or into the right way of living” (LE 5). When Wittgenstein addresses ethics, his intention is not at all to construct a moral theory — he actively refused to do so. For him, ethics *manifests* itself in our language and our actions, in our relationship with the world: “Our ethical attitude, our ‘Verhaltens’, is not just a particular view of the world; it encompasses our entire way of relating to and acting in particular circumstances” (Christensen, 2011, p. 798).

Moreover, in Wittgenstein’s philosophy, ethics and aesthetics are deeply related. In his “Lecture on Ethics,” he states that ethics “*includes* what I believe to be the most essential part of what is generally called Aesthetics” (LE 4, my italics). Wittgenstein seems to be conceiving of the two as forming a unity. The overlap between ethics and aesthetics has to do with the fact that aesthetic experiences can show us “the right perspective” (CV 4e) on the world.

One may have an aesthetic-ethical experience by looking at a work of art, but observing nature or even the most day-to-day objects may also elicit such an experience. What is relevant in the aesthetic-ethical experience is not its particular contents: “an aesthetical stance does not involve specific artistic contents, but a way of perceiving” (Varga, 2008, p. 44). Perhaps an example might be useful here. In his “Lecture on Ethics,” Wittgenstein gives three examples of what he regards as aesthetic-ethical experiences. One of them is feeling wonder at the existence of the world. Although this experience may be elicited by some particular natural or artificial object — e.g. a sunset or a piece of music — it involves the whole world. Indeed, only when an experience involves the world as a whole will it be an aesthetic experience in Wittgenstein's sense. Aesthetic experiences show us the world from a certain perspective — and such a perspective has to do with the meaning of life, with value, with ethics. The expression of one's wonder at the world is also the expression that one finds value in the world, that it is meaningful. Likewise, if one finds value in the world, then certain actions will seem valuable, good, or right. In this way, we can glimpse the relationship between aesthetics and ethics, between how we perceive the world and what our dispositions for action are. So, in aesthetic-ethical experiences we come to see the world from the right perspective. Note, however, that each and every one of our experiences involves a certain — right or wrong — aesthetic-ethical perspective and attitude towards the world; it involves a viewpoint, an *I*.

Wittgenstein draws a distinction between the *metaphysical subject* — the *I* — and the *empirical subject* — the *me*. Philosophy is concerned with the former; psychology, with the latter.

What brings the self into philosophy is the fact that ‘the world is my world’.

The philosophical self is not the human being, not the human body, or the human soul, with which psychology deals, but rather the metaphysical subject, the limit of the world — not a part of it. (TLP 5.641)

The self which does form part of the world is the psychological self; in contrast, the philosophical self cannot be found in the world since it is its limit — or, to put it another way, the philosophical self is the viewpoint, a point without extension (TLP 5.64).

Wittgenstein also tells us that “the world is my world.” Above, I quoted him saying “I am my world” (TLP 5.63). One way to interpret this is that the world is always the world experienced by a self — and, in this sense, the (metaphysical) subject constitutes the world. Now, remember that I have just said that every experience involves an ethical and aesthetic stance — for ethics includes the most essential part of aesthetics. Consider also that “Ethics must be a condition of the world” (NB 24.7.16), and that “the I [the metaphysical subject] is the bearer of ethics” (NB 5.6.18). The I would therefore be the bearer of the conditions of the world; without them, there would be no world. Every world involves an ethical and aesthetic viewpoint, an I.

Finally, let me just introduce one last question, which I will develop further below. Wittgenstein also stated that “The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man” (TLP 6.43). And that is so because the former and the latter adopt totally different points of view. More specifically, the happy man adopts the viewpoint of eternity; he sees the world *sub specie aeterni*. “To view the world *sub specie aeterni* is to view it as a whole — a limited whole. Feeling the world as a limited whole — it is this that is mystical” (TLP 6.45). For the time being, I will leave this question here, but I will go back to it when we consider the therapeutic potential of the psychedelic experience. Let us now approach the world in depression.

## 1.2. Depression in a Wittgensteinian frame

The intertwining of aesthetics and ethics in a Wittgensteinian sense, I suggest, can be found in the narratives of those suffering from depression. Consider how Antrobus characterizes depression:

Depression begins when everything else slows down and when an infinite diversity of colours bizarrely fade to monochrome; where all that you have known so well become dead, cold and indifferent; where the only progression you make is to slip further downwards, further into the dark space of loneliness. [...] Without awareness, you suddenly enter the realm where life and death no longer matter, where love or hatred no longer exist and where anything you do no longer makes a difference. Depression is a detachment from life; it detaches you from yourself. (Antrobus, 2017, p. 10)

How we perceive the world — the light in which we see it, the perspective we take on — is related to the possibilities we encounter in it — its ethical aspects, what appears as valuable, meaningful; what makes life worth living. A monochrome, dead, and cold world is a world in which what one does no longer makes a difference, and from which one feels disconnected. We can also appreciate this in a previous passage; before depression, “the world seemed so large and full of possibilities. It seemed brighter and prettier;” but now that the perspective

has shifted, “the world is small [...] I could go anywhere and do anything and nothing for me would change” (Ratcliffe, 2015, p. 67). Such a lack of meaningful possibilities for action is certainly noted by Solomon: “the meaninglessness of every enterprise [...], the meaninglessness of life itself, becomes self-evident” — and also appears linked to feelings of isolation: “we are, each of us, held in the solitude of an autonomous body” (Solomon, 2001, p. 15).

From the perspective of depression, the world loses “its welcoming quality” and one feels disconnected, detached, from it; isolated. In this regard, it is worth noting that in a recent study on the use of psychedelics for the treatment of treatment-resistant depression, 19 of the 20 patients enrolled reported feeling disconnected from the world when depressed (Watts et al. 2017). Note the special relevance of this fact, as none of the questions in the semi-structured interviews conducted directly asked what their experience of the world was like, but merely about what their experience of depression was like.

I will return to this study later, when addressing the sense of connectedness enabled by psychedelics. For now, though, let me highlight one aspect: in this study, eight patients reported what has been thematized as a “disconnection from senses,” pointing to the impoverishment of the quality and intensity of sensory perceptions. One patient manifested being intellectually able to understand beauty when looking at flowers, yet incapable of experiencing it. In my view, and according to the framework we are exploring, being unable to experience beauty might not be related to an impoverishment of the quality and intensity of sensory perceptions. For beauty, just like meaning, is not perceived through the senses; aesthetics, just like ethics, comes into the world with the subject. Moreover, although statements like the previous one might point to particular objects, such as flowers, they seem to express something deeper, they seem to be about the way the world is experienced. That is clearer in another report by a patient in the same study, who described living in a “flat” and “gray” world. Again, this conveys something deeper than an inability to perceive texture or colour. As I have pointed out, aesthetics and ethics form a unity, which suggests that if one struggles to see texture, colour, beauty in the world, one will most likely also struggle to see value and to find possibilities for action. All these aspects are telling about the perspective taken on the world.

The lack of possibilities experienced in depression is also key in Ratcliffe’s (2015) phenomenological account. I would like to stress, however, that what is missing is *meaningful* possibilities; none of the possibilities the world could offer are actual, relevant possibilities for oneself. Allow me to give a personal anecdote here. For, at this point, I cannot help but remember a conversation I had with a friend a few years ago. His brother had just committed suicide and he was trying to make sense of it. He said something like: “I don’t understand. He was still young. He had no debts. If he disliked his life, he could have moved anywhere in the world and started all over again. There are lots of possibilities.” True, in a sense, there are many possibilities; but acknowledging them as actual possibilities involves them *appealing* to us in some way. Changing certain facts — e.g. changing cities, changing jobs, changing friendships — makes no sense and no difference at all from some perspectives.

More somberly, it could be said that, in a sense, changing the *facts* of one’s life will hardly change one’s world. Remember (although I will come back to this later), what makes the world of the happy different from the world of the unhappy is the *attitude* they adopt towards it. The facts of the world of one and the other could be exactly the same and yet, depending on their perspective and attitude, the world of each would be entirely different.

If life becomes hard to bear we think of a change in our circumstances. But the most important and effective change, a change in our own attitude, hardly even occurs to us, and the resolution to take such a step is very difficult for us. (CV 53e)

In a way, depression is independent from the facts of the world: the worldview of the depressed is not a response to, nor some kind of evaluation of, facts; but rather the light, the (back)ground, in which those are experienced. And I think this is an idea that can be found in some accounts of depression, especially when trying to distinguish it from intense sadness or grief (Horwitz & Wakefield, 2007; Wakefield & Horwitz, 2016).<sup>6</sup> Depression is characterized by not being context-responsive: “it is the absence of an appropriate context for symptoms that indicates a disorder” (Horwitz & Wakefield, 2007, p. 14). Depression is “immune to changes in external conditions” (*idem*).<sup>7</sup> Depression ceases when our perspective and our attitude shift.

Now, two more issues. When I state that depression ceases when we shift our perspective, I do not mean that facts are *utterly* irrelevant. In one sense, they may be relevant. Let us take an example: one might witness a person putting one’s life on the line to save another person’s life. Witnessing that fact could *show* us a different perspective of the world; if someone acts like this, of course they must have a perspective in which saving a life is valuable. Insofar as witnessing this act can convey a different, valuable perspective, one might modify one’s own.

The second issue that I want to point here is related to the (in)ability of arguments to persuade us. As Wittgenstein put it:

I cannot through reflections make something right that appears as antics in my heart. No reasons of this world could prove, for example: that my work is important & something that I may & should do, when my heart says — without any reason — that I have to stop it. (PPO 179)

Let us consider again the example of suicide. What arguments could we give a person to convince them not to commit suicide? I think we can rest assured that, in a conversation with them, that person would have already considered a large number of arguments for continuing to live or not. Could a new argument convince them? My answer now is similar to the previous one: our success would depend on our words being able to show a different perspective of the world. Most likely, our words would not even be the most relevant thing here. For example, the love and connection that person might experience would be much more useful to achieve a shift. Arguments, like possibilities for action, can only appeal to us if a certain perspective is adopted — that perspective in which they can be meaningful.

To recap: the world is always the world of the (metaphysical) subject. Since the metaphysical subject is the bearer of ethics — which includes aesthetics — the world is always constituted from an ethical and aesthetic viewpoint. Where there is a world there is a perspective and an attitude towards it. Our perspective encompasses the aesthetic and ethical aspects that constitute the world. Our attitude involves our way of acting and relating to particular circumstances. Whether there are possibilities for action — and what these are —

<sup>6</sup> Note that by bringing up Horwitz and Wakefield’s analysis, I do not intend to endorse it (nor the opposite!). I just want to point out what seems to be a connection between my view and theirs.

<sup>7</sup> Someone might be thinking of reactive depression as a counterexample. In that case, the point would be that if the suffering is a proportional reaction — in duration and intensity — to context, then this is a sign of normal mental functioning. It is normal to have a depressed mood — along with a handful of other afflictions — when going through a stressful situation or suffering a loss. We would instead speak of depression if what began as a normal reaction to context becomes chronic regardless of it; that is, if one experiences no improvement when the situation improves or when sufficient time has elapsed to overcome a loss. Someone might then ask how to know when “enough time” has passed. To answer that question, both personal and cultural factors should be taken into account.

depends on appreciating them as valuable, on their being meaningful. In depression, the world is devoid of beauty and meaning; it is a world in which one finds no possibilities since one finds no value and feels detached. Whether the world appears like this depends on the perspective adopted. One can hardly change this perspective with arguments, since arguments can hardly change the way one *experiences* the world. Therefore, what is needed is an ability to adopt another perspective, to *experience* the world differently, and hence to adopt a different attitude towards it. Might the therapeutic potential of the psychedelic experience lie in enabling us to do that, in letting us experience a world diametrically opposed to that of depression — a beautiful, meaningful, and connected world?

## 2. The world, glowing again

I have already argued that the world is always involved in our experiencing, although in depression it becomes salient insofar as one might notice a significant perspective shift. But it is not only depression that can make the world salient; the psychedelic experience has this same potential. I take the psychedelic experience to be world-shifting. This change in the world can be for better or for worse; let us not forget that under psychedelics we can also experience a world that resembles that of depression. However, with proper preparation and caution (Johnson, Richards, and Griffiths 2008), the psychedelic experience can show us a world full of beauty and meaning, a welcoming world to which we feel connected — and it can be so profound as to leave a long-lasting — sometimes even everlasting! — impression.

The point that I will be making in this section is that the therapeutic potential that psychedelics hold — especially in the treatment of depression, but not only — is related to the fact that the world they open up to us is diametrically opposed to that of depression. Compare this report with the previous ones on depression:

Everything was so bright and colorful. It was like a cartoon almost. I couldn't even explain why or how it was so beautiful now, but I was in awe. [...] I had an entirely new appreciation for everything that I took for granted previously. It was a beautiful, chilly fall day. Everything was so colorful and vibrant. [...] I remember [...] thinking about how we're all in this together. We're all connected. Everyone is just their own separation of consciousness making its way through the same world. This made me feel very happy. (Skrik 2019: §12–15)<sup>8</sup>

The three aspects of the psychedelic experience that I now want to address appear in these lines: beauty, meaning, and oneness. All of them are both recurring themes in the narratives of those who underwent a therapeutic psychedelic experience and key aspects of the aesthetic, ethical, or mystical experiences as Wittgenstein conceives of them.

### 2.1. Beauty and meaning

Recall that the distinctive mark of an aesthetic experience is not its relationship to a particular object or fact, but the way it is perceived. So, although the experience of beauty may be evoked by a particular object — e.g. a flower — it will only be an aesthetic experience in the Wittgensteinian sense if it involves the whole world. Such experiences bring about a certain feeling of wonder, awe, or meaning.

This relationship between beauty and meaning can easily be found in a well-known classic of the psychedelic literature: Aldous Huxley. In the quote below, we can appreciate not only this relationship, but also the idea that the world is always involved in our experience and that the visionary experience — in Huxley's terms — can alter it dramatically. It is also important

<sup>8</sup> This passage can be found in Erowid's database. This and all of the following passages I quote from Erowid are from people who report suffering from depression and recount their personal experiences with LSD, outside of a clinical setting.

to note that the perception of the world in the visionary experience is again opposed to the perception of the world in depression:

For most of us most of the time, the world of everyday experience seems rather dim and drab. But for a few people often, and for a fair number occasionally, some of the brightness of visionary experience spills over, as it were, into common seeing, and the everyday universe is transfigured. [...] Preternatural light and color are common to all visionary experiences. And along with light and color there goes, in every case, a recognition of heightened significance. The self-luminous objects which we see in the mind's antipodes possess a meaning, and this meaning is, in some sort, as intense as their color. (Huxley, 2004, pp. 93–95)

So far, I have mainly emphasized visual aesthetic aspects, but we should not forget that sound also plays a crucial role in the psychedelic experience. In this regard, music has gained a prominent place in psychedelic therapy, as it is well known that it helps both to guide the experience and to elicit a sense of meaningfulness (Barrett et al., 2018). However, such an aesthetic experience can also occur spontaneously — e.g. evoked by the sounds of nature:

I listened to the wind against the leaves of the trees and heard all of the tiny sounds coming from all parts of the nature that surrounded me. This was by far the most calming and absolutely gorgeous sound I had ever heard. (Gabe 2018: §5)

The close relationship between aesthetics and meaning can also be found in emerging literature. In a recent paper, Hartogsohn (2018) points to “psychedelic aesthetics and its crucial relation to radical alterations in the perception of meaning” (p. 2). In there, Hartogsohn argues in favour of the meaning-enhancing effects of psychedelics as a key to therapy, spirituality, and creativity enhancement. I clearly agree that meaning enhancement is a centerpiece of the psychedelic experience, although in my view it should be framed within a more general shift in perspective and attitude towards the world — which, let us not forget, includes the psychological, or biographical, self. The perspective we adopt on the world involves an ethical attitude; i.e. it is a practical disposition. Seeing the world as meaningful, or seeing meaning in the world, thus involves one having meaningful possibilities for action — the absence of which is of paramount importance in depression. Therefore, being able to adopt a perspective in which the world is beautiful and meaningful is particularly relevant for the treatment of depression because the perception of meaning or value opens up possibilities for action. It brings us back to a welcoming world.

As I stepped out into the warm morning air, suddenly every ounce of the depression lifted. The pain was gone. I looked around, everything looked so beautiful in the vague pre-dawn half light, and I smiled. [...] Each breath tasted sweet and each step filled me with a renewed energy. [...] everything natural was emitting a faint blue glow and the more I gazed over it all, the more it healed me and made me feel alive. [...] I had one of those life-changing revelations that one often has on acid, but this one really did change my life. [...] because I'd slipped into my own little world and started ignoring everything around me I became depressed. [...] I finally saw the way out of my mental problems. (Mem 2009: §10–15)

Next, I would like to comment on another mechanism that has recently been proposed as key to the therapeutic potential of the psychedelic experience: awe.<sup>9</sup> According to Hendricks (2018), “the emotion awe is the primary psychological mechanism of action undergirding the

<sup>9</sup> Note that, in his “Lecture on Ethics,” Wittgenstein considered feeling wonder — a concept very close to that of awe — at the existence of the world as an aesthetic-ethical experience.

salubrious effects of mystical experience occasioned by classic psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy” (p. 332). Hendricks' proposal builds on the evidence supporting the correlation between the mystical qualities — among which is the sense of awe — of the psychedelic experience and its positive, therapeutic outcomes. He points to awe as a primary mechanism to explain how or why mystical experiences elicit long-term benefits. He locates the defining characteristic of awe's acute effects in “the small self” (p. 333), which involves feelings of connectedness or oneness with others and/or the environment, and thus the self ceases to occupy a central position. I will come back to this in a moment.

Hendricks also contends that feeling awe involves the experience of vastness. In a recent article that attempts to clarify the concept of 'awe' — while distinguishing it from the closely-related concept of 'wonder' — its authors suggest the following: “the crucial question is not whether [what is perceived] is vast *per se* but whether the beholder can frame it in such ways that it becomes significant” (Weger & Wagemann, 2021, p. 1378). This bears a resounding similarity to the notions of perspective and aesthetics we are dealing with — and it becomes clearer when we read that “In other words, the issue of awe is not only a question of what the phenomenon has to offer to the beholder; but what the beholder has to offer to the phenomenon” (*idem*). Therefore, what is relevant when feeling awe is not the particular object — the contents of the aesthetic experience — but the perspective adopted towards it. This suggests that one can feel awe by looking at tiny, everyday objects. This is, in fact, a common experience under the effects of psychedelics.

I stared at this leaf, and watched all of the tiny, intricate patterns in the leaf dance and breathe as if it was just as alive as I was. I absolutely marveled at these details and was astonished, at the fact that something so small and minute as a leaf, could have so much detail put into it. I continued to lay and stare at this leaf in awe as I pondered this question of detail in small forms. [...] human existence is no different than the tree and its leaves. We grow as people and expand ourselves, only to die in the end, only to rejoin the rest of the universe as one [...] I felt as though all of my questions were answered and that I could rejoin the universe and exist in harmony [...] It is beauty in and of itself that I wish I could hold onto. (Gabe 2018: §5–7)

This passage prompts us again to underscore the relationship between awe, beauty, and meaning. If we were to ask why feeling awe has a therapeutic potential, I think we could expand on the answer previously given when considering the meaning-enhancing properties of psychedelics, and address one last aspect: oneness. In doing this, by the way, we will take up a point that I have just mentioned and left open: awe and the small self; i.e. “the view that the self is part of something larger” (Bonner & Friedman, 2011, p. 224).

## 2.2. Oneness

One of the points I highlighted earlier about depression revolved around feelings of disconnection. Such a disconnection could present itself in different ways, although it usually involves a feeling of loneliness, of isolation from the world and from others. I aim to show in this subsection that one of the reasons why the psychedelic experience can be helpful in dealing with depression is because it places us in the opposite perspective; it connects us to the world. Here we enter the realm of mysticism — although, in doing so, we do not necessarily depart from *this* world, as I will argue.

One of the characteristic factors of mystical-type experiences is a certain feeling of oneness, or unity. This aspect has been highlighted by classic authors such as Walter T. Stace (1960) and William James (2012), and is also included in the widely used Pahnke-Richards Mystical Experience Questionnaire (Barrett et al., 2015; MacLean et al., 2012; Pahnke & Richards, 1966). Such feelings are also characteristic of the psychedelic experience — and

this is one of the reasons that has led to the conception of the psychedelic experience as a mystical-type experience (Pahnke 1963; Watts 1968; Griffiths et al. 2006; Griffiths et al. 2008).

The notion of unity is also found in Wittgenstein, related to mysticism. As McGuinness (1966) points out: “Most definitions of mysticism refer to it as a union: in Wittgenstein's case (that is to say, in the case described — whether experienced or not — by Wittgenstein) the union will be a union with the world, with Nature” (p. 321). This point is important: such a feeling of connection or oneness need not (although it might!) be related to some kind of supernatural entity — e.g. God — but may take the form of a union with the world, Nature, or even Humanity. “For Wittgenstein's mystic, as for Aldous Huxley under mescaline, the phenomenal world is very far from unreal: indeed it is a kind of dwelling on its reality or *Istigkeit* [“issness”] that is the most important part of the mystical experience”<sup>10</sup> (p. 323). Thus, Wittgenstein's mysticism does not take us away from the world, but brings us together with it.

This sense of unity lies behind some of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* passages I quoted. Unity is related to the view of the world as a whole. And to see the world as a whole is to see it *sub specie aeterni* — that is, from the perspective of eternity, outside of time. Of course, this is a complex issue that requires interpretation. The adoption of such a perspective has been interpreted as a detachment from the world (Thomas, 1999), but I think this reading can be misleading. True, there is a sense in which the viewpoint of eternity distances us from the world, and it involves a certain ethics of acceptance: we distance ourselves from *how* the world happens to be — that is, we accept whatever turns out to be the case, whatever might happen.<sup>11</sup> However, in another sense, it is not detachment, but quite the opposite. The perspective of eternity is a perspective outside time, but Wittgenstein equates it with the perspective of the present, with being fully immersed in the present (Kügler, 2021). Whoever lives in the present, lives in eternity: “If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present” (TLP 6.4311). Hence, seeing the world *sub specie aeterni* immerses us fully in the present and in the world. As paradoxical as it may sound, by feeling at one with the world, we are able to distance ourselves from its contingencies. If one is able to live “in eternity and not in time,” then “life stops being problematic” (NB 6.7.16).

Transcendence of time (and space) has been identified as one of the core features of the mystical experience (James, 2012; Stace, 1960) — and also often occurs in the psychedelic experience (Barrett et al., 2015; MacLean et al., 2012; Pahnke & Richards, 1966). However, by adopting this perspective, one need not *step out* of this world; one may be immersed in the present. The therapeutic role of being in the present is shown, for example, by mindfulness (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Cash & Whittingham, 2010). We can also appreciate such a therapeutic potential in the psychedelic experience. Consider the following excerpts from patients who were treated with psilocybin to overcome the depression and anxiety associated with their cancer:

The percentage of my life that I am able to be present in just a moment has increased dramatically [...] just to lose yourself in the moment [...] it is unique and monumental in a way. (Swift et al., 2017, p. 19)

<sup>10</sup> Compare such dwelling on the *Istigkeit*, or *issness*, to this testimony on depression: “There was an essential wordlessness [...] it was as if the whatness of each thing — I'm no good at philosophical vocabulary — but the essence of each thing in the sense of the tableness of the table or the chairness of the chair or the flooriness of the floor was gone” (Hornstein, 2009, pp. 212–213).

<sup>11</sup> Which, by the way, is closely related to the second of the aesthetic-ethical-mystical experiences that Wittgenstein gives as an example in his “Lecture on Ethics:” feeling *absolutely* safe, no matter what happens.

I really want to enjoy every minute, I want to enjoy being alive, and I knew that before the study but afterwards I became able to do it much more often. I have found ways to make that happen. (Swift et al., 2017, p. 20)

The ethical dimension, in the Wittgensteinian sense, of being immersed in the present moment also becomes manifest when patients express their “expanded perspective on what was felt to be most important and meaningful in life” (Swift et al., 2017, p. 24). As one of them puts it: “Every moment has so many possibilities” (Swift et al., 2017, p. 20).

Another way to approach oneness is through *connectedness*. *Connectedness*, alongside *acceptance*, were the two major themes that emerged in an analysis already mentioned about the narratives of 20 patients following psilocybin-assisted therapy for treatment-resistant depression (Watts et al. 2017). It should be noted that “Of the 17 patients who endorsed the treatment’s effectiveness, all made reference to one particular mediating factor: a renewed sense of connection or connectedness” (Carhart-Harris, Erritzoe, et al. 2018). Connectedness is thought to be the core factor that underlies the therapeutic potential of psychedelics, whether for depression or another condition (Watts et al. 2017, 201; Carhart-Harris, Erritzoe, et al. 2018). The analysis of patients’ narratives revealed that before/after treatment, they felt respectively disconnected/connected from senses, self, others, and the world.

The authors of the study hypothesize that the “connection-to-self is a bedrock from which connection to others and the world can follow most naturally” (Carhart-Harris, Erritzoe, et al. 2018, 548). The framework that I have been developing here would instead suggest another different approach. In it, the “bedrock” would be the perspective, the way in which one experiences the world. Thus, it follows that by having a different perspective one adopts a different view on the psychological self and others, since both are part of the world. Furthermore, since every viewpoint also involves an attitude, one will therefore adopt a different attitude towards the psychological self and others. And it seems that experiencing oneness or connectedness leads to *acceptance*, while experiencing disconnection leads to what has been thematized as *avoidance*.

When we feel disconnected from the world, we are at odds with the world, with what actually happens or might happen. This includes the events that the psychological self has gone, or could go, through — the events of one’s biographical life, which may involve others — and the emotions felt.

A lot happened when I was younger, more than I could deal with. I put it all in a box. I used to sidestep things emotionally, push things away, but that doesn’t get rid of what you’ve avoided, what you’ve sidestepped is still there. (Watts et al. 2017, 17)

In contrast, connection brings with it acceptance, reconciliation:

I have felt a sense of acceptance; more acceptance of agony, boredom, loneliness, and also appreciation of the wonderful times. [A] willingness to try to accept the negative times. (Watts et al. 2017, 22)

I realised that my mother was out on a ledge, we were two people out on a ledge, she too was completely unconnected, disconnected. I felt some compassion for her [...] a different perspective, that it wasn’t an all powerful world and universe against me, my mother too was out on a ledge. (Watts et al. 2017, 14)

Thus, it would seem that by feeling part of a whole, by feeling connected, we become more accepting of contingencies, both our own and those of others.

### 2.3. ‘The happy life is good, the unhappy bad’

I hope that we are now in a position to understand an issue that I left open earlier: the enigmatic *Tractatus* proposition that reads: “The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man” (TLP 6.43). I think that, for all that I have said, it is not far-fetched to claim that the world of the unhappy is the world as seen in depression; and that the psychedelic experience opens the door, for a few hours, to inhabit the world of the happy. In it, everything looks completely different — it is the world as a whole that has changed.<sup>12</sup>

So, does it all mean that when one walks through that door, one's perspective of the world is changed forever? In some cases, it may be so, as shown by Doblin's (1991) follow-up study on those who took part in the Good Friday Experiment (Pahnke, 1963) — which sought to enable experiences of a mystical nature by administering psilocybin in a religious setting. After more than 20 years, *all* participants who Doblin was able to reach continued to consider this experience as one of the high points of their life. But it should be noted that this is not always the case, especially when dealing with severe mental disorders. For the time being, the results of psychedelic therapy for the treatment of depression are promising, as they show a significant improvement up to six months after therapy (Carhart-Harris, Bolstridge, et al. 2018). Note, however, that, in many cases, even if the symptoms of depression reappear, having seen the world in the light of the psychedelic experience seems to hold some therapeutic potential, since it evidences that experiencing another world is possible, which may instill in us the will to achieve it again. Perhaps because “the happy life is good, the unhappy bad [...], the happy life seems to be justified, of itself, it seems that it is the only right life” (NB 30.7.16). As one patient put it:

It's always there; we just don't notice, and I'm trying to notice and not forget that I can see it at any time, I can hear it any time. It's like waking up in the most profound way, that this is really what life is. (Swift et al., 2017, p. 20)

As powerful as the psychedelic experience might be, however, I could not fail to mention another key aspect to its therapeutic outcome: integration. The psychological integration of experience is crucial for positive therapeutic outcomes. Although this issue might seem to be the domain of psychology, philosophy can also make relevant contributions. Here, I will just point out the apparent importance of not only engaging in self-reflection and re-evaluation of the contingencies of our life, but also in certain *activities* that make us experience this perspective of the world anew — activities that enhance our creativity or aesthetic appreciation, or that connect us with others and nature. For *experiencing* is the key.

### 3. Conclusion

Throughout the chapter, I have defended the relevance of the notion of world in both the experience of depression and the psychedelic experience. This is an important first point for, as I argued elsewhere (Ballesteros, 2018), our understanding of depression and its treatment shape each other. The main thesis I have argued in favour of is that the therapeutic potential

<sup>12</sup> This sentence, by the way, bears a remarkable resemblance to Fredrik Svenaeus' statement: “The world of the physical sufferer is totally different, in wholes as well as bits, from the world of the happy enjoyer” (Svenaeus, 2018, p. 21). In the passage to which this excerpt belongs, Svenaeus reflects on pain and contends that, when in pain, the whole world of the sufferer appears in a painful manner. For Svenaeus, and for a long-standing phenomenological tradition, the notion of world is also key. He conceives of illness as an “unhomelike being-in-the-world” (Svenaeus, 2022). In his approach, however, embodiment — which is something I have not explored in this chapter — also occupies a central role. Those interested in an account of the treatment of depression with psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy based on the work of Svenaeus may read Riccardo Miceli and Christopher Jordens' (2022) article.

of the psychedelic experience — especially in the treatment of depression — lies in its ability to shift one’s perspective on the world. The psychedelic experience is world-shifting.

Drawing on Wittgenstein’s conceptions of aesthetics and ethics, I have argued that in depression the world is devoid of beauty and meaning — therefore, it lacks meaningful possibilities for action. In depression, moreover, one feels disconnected from the world, at odds with it. The world that psychedelics enable us to experience, in contrast, is beautiful, full of meaning, and one feels a part of it. From this viewpoint of unity — which is the mystical, according to Wittgenstein — we come to accept the contingencies of our life. Moreover, insofar as we see value in the world, we also see valuable possibilities for action. Adopting a new viewpoint and attitude towards the world also involves placing ourselves in a new perspective and disposition towards our relationship with others and our biographical self, since both are part of the world. Crucially, a change in the perspective on the world involves a change in self-representation, linked to the emergence of new explanations about oneself and a new horizon of possibilities.

Although I have focused on discussing the therapeutic power of the experience itself, I have also pointed out that its integration is an important part of obtaining the best mental health outcomes. In this regard, it seems to follow from our framework that experiential approaches — that is, those that allow us to *experience* the world from *the right* perspective — might be particularly beneficial. This may be a line of research worth investigating.

Finally, I would like to point to another aspect that could benefit from some Wittgenstein-inspired insights, allowing further progress in the epistemological terrain: the relationship between our experience of the world and the beliefs we hold about it. In this regard, a new line of research has emerged around what has been called “primal world beliefs,” or just “primals” (Clifton et al., 2019). Primals are defined as beliefs about the general character of the world as a whole — e.g. “the world is interesting,” “the world is safe” — and they seem to be strongly correlated with many personality and wellbeing variables. Remarkably, moreover, primal world beliefs have been found to be quite stable over time and — although more research is needed — preliminary data suggest that each person’s primals are largely independent of their particular circumstances and previous life experiences (Clifton, 2020). *Prima facie*, this stability and independence fits well with the framework I have put forward here, according to which one’s perspective of the world is to some extent independent of particular facts. I would hypothesize that primal world beliefs do not enjoy the same epistemic status as other beliefs, but rather function as the bedrock that allows us to evaluate and make sense of particular facts, including our actions and those of others. I would also hypothesize that the psychedelic experience has some potential to modify primals — which seems plausible in view of the evidence showing changes in metaphysical beliefs (Timmermann et al., 2021). And, if this happens to be the case, consolidating certain primal world beliefs might also play a key role in a psychological integration that promotes long-term mental health.

## **Abbreviations**

CV: *Culture and Value*

LE: “Lecture on Ethics”

NB: *Notebooks 1914-1916*

PI: *Philosophical Investigations*

PPO: *Private and Public Occasions*

TLP: *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

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