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Epiphanies and aspirations: how psychedelic experiences affect values

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Recent research suggests that experiences induced by psychedelic compounds such as LSD or psilocybin-containing mushrooms can lead to changes in personal values, including heightened prosocial, altruistic, and pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours, as well as an increased appreciation of art and spirituality.¹ Phenomena such as reconnection to one's values, re-evaluation of life priorities, and adaptation of novel interest, hobbies and more radical changes in life's direction are reported as outcomes of psychedelic experiences.² However, our understanding of the processes underpinning these changes remains limited. In this chapter, I endeavour to construct a psychologically realistic and contextually nuanced explanation of psychedelic-induced changes in values by delving into the interplay between momentary value-changing transformative experiences and diachronic processes of intentional value learning.

Though we often speak of life transforming *experiences*, it is also commonly acknowledged in the psychedelic literature that lasting change requires work after the experience – psychedelics can show new perspectives but after the experiences the hard work of inner change falls on the efforts of the person.³ Sudden transformative experiences and insights can sometimes abruptly alter beliefs and perspectives on life.⁴

¹ Juuso Kähönen, 'Psychedelic Unselfing: Self-Transcendence and Change of Values in Psychedelic Experiences', *Frontiers in Psychology* 14, (2023).

² Ibid.

³ Roger Walsh, 'From State to Trait The Challenge of Transforming Transient Insights into Enduring Change Roger N. Walsh', in *2001 Psychoactive Sacramentals Essays on Entheogens and Religion. Council on Spiritual Practices*, ed. Thomas B. Roberts 2001: 19–27; R.E.L. Masters and J. Houston, *The Varieties of Psychedelic Experience*, (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966): 260.

⁴ Kadi Tulver et al., 'Restructuring Insight: An Integrative Review of Insight in Problem-Solving, Meditation, Psychotherapy, Delusions and Psychedelics', *Consciousness and Cognition* 110, (1 April 2023), 103494; C. Timmermann et al., 'Psychedelics Alter Metaphysical Beliefs', *Scientific Reports* 11, (2021), 22166; Sandeep M. Nayak and Roland R. Griffiths, 'A Single Belief-Changing Psychedelic Experience Is Associated With Increased Attribution of Consciousness to Living and Non-Living Entities', *Frontiers in Psychology* 13, (2022), 852248; Kähönen, 2023.

However, in the case of value changes, sustained and robust changes should involve changes in the life and behaviour of an individual, which cannot change during a singular experience. The notion of transformative experiences risks oversimplifying the complex structure of such changes and abstracting away the active role of the person after the experience, as well as the complex contextual factors surrounding the experience.

To formally articulate these ideas, I propose that transformative changes in valuations typically involve a two-step process, experience *and* long-term active striving prompted by the experience. Drawing from recent moral philosophy, I'll refer to these steps as epiphanies and aspiration:

Epiphany: An epiphany is an overwhelming existentially significant manifestation of value in experience. (Definition by Chappell.)⁵

Aspiration: Aspiration is the distinctive form of agency directed at the acquisition and realization of personal values. (Definition by Callard, with slight modifications.)⁶

I refer to the valuative transformative psychedelic experiences as epiphanies, defined as states of enhanced grasp of values. I suggest that *epiphanies tend to catalyse aspiration*, compelling individuals to align their life with values revealed by epiphanies — whether through reconnecting with values already recognized or realizing novel perspectives. Thematizing aspirations as an integral component within the broader process of value change prompts us to rethink how psychedelic transformations occur, what they entail and what 'integration' in the context of psychedelic value changes means.

Consider these real-life cases, and the relations they imply between the immediate psychedelic experience and long-term aspirations:

Case 1: Richard Alpert, a Harvard psychology professor later known as the spiritual teacher and mystic known Ram Dass, after extensive experimentation

⁵ Sophie Grace Chappell, *Epiphanies: An Ethics of Experience*, First edition, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

⁶ Agnes Callard, *Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018): 4–5.

with psychedelics was “turned on” to such an extent that he decided to abandon academia and pursue spiritual path.⁷

Case 2: Ben Goldsmith, a financier turned into environmental activist recollected that “one of the effects of his ayahuasca trip was an enduring and overwhelming desire to dedicate the rest of his life to environmental causes”.⁸

Case 3: In Belser et al.’s study, terminal cancer patients described “revised life priorities” as a major effect of psilocybin therapy: “These participants came to “remember” during their psilocybin session what to them was most important about life. [...] [and] were compelled to reorient their lives afterward in a way that continued to connect them to a similar place.” (p. 374, emphasis added)⁹

All these cases presumably involved epiphanic experience, which affected life courses of individuals, sometimes to significant degrees. However, it is equally true that these experiences cannot *fully* account for the whole arc of long-term aspirations and change after the experience, but rather functioned as a trigger or a catalyst, which fuelled the subsequent aspirations towards relevant values and sensibilities that presumably were grasped, deepened, or reconnected to in psychedelic epiphanic experiences.

Another key point I want to make is that epiphanies often occur in the context of already existing aspirational trajectories – neither Alpert nor Goldsmith entered the experience from a cultural, valuative or biographical vacuum. Psychedelics experiences can affirm or challenge one’s prior valuations and goals, and thus either reinforce one’s prior aspirational trajectories or change these trajectories. Even more generally, both aspiration and epiphanies are embedded in rich cultural and social contexts, involving cultural frameworks of meaning-making and other practices and social support, which inform and condition their content. Thus, the conceptual framing I suggest invites us to stress the contextual factors of transformation, and sheds light on the contextual and cultural conditioning of epiphanic experiences.

⁷ J. Stevens, *Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream*, (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1987); D. E. Osto, *Altered States: Buddhism and Psychedelic Spirituality in America*, 1st edition, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

⁸ Ruby Deevoy, ‘Could Psychedelic Trips Inspire Faster Climate Action?’, *Raconteur* 5 August 2023.

⁹ A.B. Belser et al., ‘Patient Experiences of Psilocybin-Assisted Psychotherapy: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis’, *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 574, (2017), 354–388.

While exploring value changes associated with psychedelics, this chapter is relevant for understanding value changes in general. Epiphanies and aspirations should be part of a comprehensive theory of value changes, and are almost completely ignored in psychological theories of values change.¹⁰ Moreover, this chapter provides an empirically informed analysis for the broader philosophical discourse on aspiration and epiphanies, enriching Agnes Callard's (2018) account of aspiration by integrating it with Sophie Grace Chappell's (2022) account of epiphanies, which in turn is enriched by discussing epiphanies in light of the findings of recent psychedelic research. I assert that epiphanic experiences are a significant part of the moral psychology of aspiration, emphasizing the necessity of understanding epiphanies for a comprehensive account of aspiration. Emphasizing the role of exceptional experiences as potential points of enhanced contact with value(s), I posit that epiphanic experiences hold a specific epistemic and ethical significance.

Concerning the theme of this volume, my claims generalize for epiphanies and trajectories of aspiration brought by any means, including non-psychedelic psychoactive substances, practices such as meditation or spontaneous transformative experiences. According to our present knowledge, psychedelics may be the most epiphanic of psychoactive substances – although more research on other substances is needed.¹¹

In the following I will first lay out a philosophical background theory of values, epiphanies, and aspiration. Then I utilize this theoretical framework to analyse psychedelics, exploring psychedelic epiphanies, aspirations and the specific direction aspiration is likely to take after psychedelics.

Philosophy of transformation: values, epiphanies, and aspiration

Values, valuations, and experience

The concept of "value" holds two intertwined meanings, both central to the chapter's account and crucial to distinguish: **personal values** and **objectual values** or **values in**

¹⁰ Anat Bardi and Robin Goodwin, 'The Dual Route to Value Change: Individual Processes and Cultural Moderators', *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 42, no. 2 (1 March 2011): 271–87, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022110396916>; However, as an exception see: Abraham H. Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (New York: Viking Press, 1971).

¹¹ Most of the research focuses on classical, i.e. serotonergic psychedelics, although compounds such as ketamine and MDMA can bring similarly epiphanic experiences. If we focus solely on aspiration, it is likely that other psychoactive substances such as stimulants and nootropics might be helpful for aspiration by enhancing attention or motivation. A related question is whether enhancement of attention alone increases the likelihood of epiphanies (cf. Panizza 2022).

the world. Personal values or valuations refer to internal cognitive structures guiding choices and behaviour by establishing abstract goals and priorities.¹² Valuations are fusion of beliefs and affective tendencies, encompassing motivational, affective, and cognitive components that direct behaviour, dispose us for appropriate affective responses, and involve judgments about what is good or right.¹³ Thus, changes in valuations affect both our behaviour and understanding what is valuable.¹⁴ Central for the purposes of this chapter, personal values are integral to personal identity.¹⁵ Both philosophical reasoning and empirical research support the notion that values and identity are central for ethics, as they flesh out one's conception of the good and direct one's choices.¹⁶

What makes personal values meaningful at all, is that they point towards or postulate a supposed value in the world. In this contrasting objectual meaning, values refer to the intrinsic value of the objects and the world (e.g. that nature or human life is valuable), and their evaluative properties or features (e.g., perceiving a painting as beautiful or considering a court decision as just). The values that epiphanies reveal and we aspire towards are values in this objectual sense.¹⁷ Whether these objectual values, i.e. values and evaluative properties apprehended in world and at the object-pole of the experience, are *objective* in the sense of being mind-independent or intersubjectively shared is a metaethical question of its own, far outside the scope of this chapter. Regardless of their metaethical status, values are part of our phenomenal world, and certain morally significant phenomenological aspects of values deserve attention.¹⁸ At

¹² Daphna Oyserman, 'Values, Psychology Of', *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* 31 December 2015; Mark E. Koltko-Rivera, 'The Psychology of Worldviews', *Review of General Psychology* 8, no. 1, (1 March 2004), 3–58; M. Rokeach, *The Nature of Human Values*, (New York: Free Press, 1973): 6–7; Bardi and Goodwin, 2011.

¹³ Callard, 2018, 118–119.

¹⁴ Bardi and Goodwin, 2011.

¹⁵ Steven Hitlin, 'Values as the Core of Personal Identity: Drawing Links between Two Theories of Self', *Social Psychology Quarterly* 66, no. 2, (2003), 118–137; Elliot T. Berkman, Jordan L. Livingston, and Lauren E. Kahn, 'Finding The "Self" in Self-Regulation: The Identity-Value Model', *Psychological Inquiry* 28, no. 2–3, (3 July 2017), 77–98.

¹⁶ Callard, 2018; Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 2001); Birgitta Gatersleben, Niamh Murtagh, and Wokje Abrahamse, 'Values, Identity and pro-Environmental Behaviour', *Contemporary Social Science* 9, no. 4, (2 October 2014), 374–392; Tom Crompton and Tim Kasser, 'Human Identity: A Missing Link in Environmental Campaigning', *Environment* 52, (29 June 2010), 23–33.

¹⁷ Although I don't aim at complete terminological rigor, as values in these two senses are often intertwined (as in the phrases 'living according to values' or 'value learning'), I will mostly refer to values in this objectual sense if using the word unqualified, except in common phrases such as 'value change' and 'core value' which denote personal values.

¹⁸ D. J. Hobbs, *Towards a Phenomenology of Values: Investigations of Worth*, (New York: Routledge, 2021).

least phenomenologically, values appear as heteronomous – as realities independent of us which can be recognized, attended to, and conceived.¹⁹ If we recognize a given value, it has normative power over our behaviour and motivation, by providing reasons for action.²⁰ Being in good contact with values and objects of valuation is partly synonymous to being receptive to reasons they provide. Thus, values and volition are inherently connected: attending to the world in its full value-ladenness often motivates us, that is, normatively compels us to act according to the values we grasp or aim towards.²¹

Secondly, centrally for epiphanies and aspiration, our connectedness to and capacity to recognize values varies over time.²² We can be ignorant of certain values, but later attend to or learn the relevant sensibilities to appreciate these values – which casts our former ignorance as a form of value blindness. Our experience of values and evaluative properties is malleable, and there are optimal subjective conditions for recognition of each respective value.²³ Attending to the beauty of the starry night sky or a piece of art requires not only good eyesight but also relevant sensibilities and the right state of mind.²⁴ Valuations and subjective traits are central filters predisposing which values are apprehendable for us.²⁵

On the other hand, recognition of values affects valuations: valuations can be seen as objectual values internalized into cognitive schemas: i.e. models or predictions about what is important, and what we should pursue. Both epiphanies and aspiration are processes central for internalizing objectual values into personal values: i.e. processes of value-learning where values outside of us impress themselves on us, changing our valuative structure. In both cases, these processes occur experientially and consciously, in contrast to other types of values change.²⁶

¹⁹ Chappell, 2022, 111–112; 129–130.

²⁰ Hobbs, 2021, 47–48; 77; 81–82; Silvia Caprioglio Panizza, *The Ethics of Attention: Engaging the Real with Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil*, (New York, NY, USA: Routledge Studies in Ethics and Moral Theory, 2022): 129; Chappell, 2022, 112–113.

²¹ Cf. Panizza, 2022; Chappell, 2022; Hobbs, 2021.

²² Cf. Hobbs, 2021, 135.

²³ Ibid., 133; 138; 140.

²⁴ Of course, all this raises significant epistemic and metaethical questions about whose valuative perspective is the correct one, and how much we can err in our attributions of value – which cannot be delved in here, suffice to say that I am not claiming that our perspectives on values are infallible.

²⁵ Panizza, 2022; Kähönen, 2023; Sebastian Watzl, ‘What Attention Is. The Priority Structure Account’, *WIREs Cognitive Science* 14, no. 1, (2023), e1632; Hobbs, 2021; Chappell, 2022, 113, 129.

²⁶ Bardi and Goodwin, 2011.

Epiphanies: manifestation of values in experience

I adopt the concept and definition of epiphanies from Chappell:

An epiphany is an overwhelming existentially significant manifestation of value in experience, often sudden and surprising, which feeds the psyche, which feels like it ‘comes from outside’—it is something given, relative to which I am a passive perceiver—which teaches us something new, which ‘takes us out of ourselves’, and to which there is a natural and correct response.²⁷

In line with Chappell, I use epiphanies as an umbrella term to capture the valuative peak experiences, or peak experiences in our ethical life.²⁸ Chappell views ‘epiphany’ as a broad, focal-case concept that subsumes experiences ranging from life-transforming experiences to minor ‘micro-epiphanies’, and from cognitively and epistemically loaded insights ('aha-moments') to aesthetic and existential epiphanies ('wow-moments').²⁹

Chappell highlights ethically significant ways epiphanic experiences can affect individuals, both in their power to motivate action and changes in lifestyle, as well as change in our ways of seeing through cognitive and existential reframing, functioning as aspect changes or gestalt switches in one's valuative landscape.³⁰ Chappell writes:

Encounters with values can be revelations to us of something that founds, or again that revolutionizes, the whole way we see the world, the whole way we think about value in general, our entire motivational and justificatory outlook; they can be moving, awesome, inspiring; they can give us a sense of the transcendent or the infinite.³¹

As Chappell notes, epiphanies can function as revelations about the nature of the good, discussed by Murdoch³² as ‘moral illuminations’, and by Taylor³³ as ‘moral sources’.

²⁷ Chappell, 2022, 8.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 11, 21.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 15, 17–18.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 114.

³² Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, (Harmondsworth Penguin, 1992): 335.

³³ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989): 96; Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

Epiphanies abound in founding stories of various religious and philosophical traditions.³⁴ The idea that values are optimally grasped in exceptional experiences is articulate at least as early as in Plato's Symposium and has notable modern precedents in thinkers such as Abraham Maslow³⁵ and William James³⁶.

Or, instead of radically altering one's valuative perspective, some epiphanies serve as reminders of what was already known, evoking "a sense of encountering something that was there already, just waiting for you to notice it."³⁷ Such realizations are not about discovering new values but involve a deeper engagement with what genuinely matters to us. This reconnection entails encountering and recognizing anew a value that was previously acknowledged but might have turned from a living reality into a stale concept.

The key idea I extract from Chappell is that epiphanies can provide experiential knowledge of values: more fully realizing what is important is a central aspect and fruit of epiphanies. Thus, a double kind of 'value realization' could be seen as a central function of epiphanies: they can both constitute insights into values and make our somewhat abstract and stale valuations into deeply felt and experiential realities. Epiphanies are experiences where our grasp and connectedness to a value is optimal, representing the high-points or peaks of our experiential connection to values. These are moments where values become more accessible, and their salience is heightened, with minimal obstacles to perceiving them. In this way, epiphanies contribute to the formation and deepening of personal values and orienting towards values in the world. Epiphanies not only deepen our understanding of the value but also establish a motivational foundation for further possibilities of action – which might result in aspiration. Thus, expanded valuative perspectives provided by epiphanies are epistemically and ethically significant.

On a philosophical note, one might be sceptical whether epiphanies (psychedelic or otherwise) are genuine revelations of value or mere wishful projections. As Chappell notes, epiphanies are culturally and historically loaded and fallible, as our other perceptions are. Both the truths realized in insights, as well as the existential significance realized in wow-moments are fallible – but not systematically so. Crucially,

³⁴ Chappell, 2022, 385–391.

³⁵ Abraham H. Maslow, *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences*, (Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1970).

³⁶ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, (London ; New York: Routledge, 2008).

³⁷ Chappell, 2022, 4, 15.

epistemic infallibility is not required for instructiveness and usefulness for life - and epiphanies' worth derives at least as much from their capacity to move the human heart as from their epistemic role. However, there are real epistemic risks. Empirical research on psychedelic insights suggest that knowledge arrived through epiphanic experiences with associated 'noetic quality' might be more recalcitrant and less amenable to revision than through knowledge arrived in less elevated states of mind.³⁸ To fully address these risks and doubts, epistemic and metaethical exploration of epiphanies and values are required, which cannot be conducted here.³⁹ A minimum claim is that at least certain valuative perspectives can be opened through epiphanies – whether they present ultimate or even reliable forms of knowledge is a matter of debate.⁴⁰

Aspiration: striving towards values

I draw the concept of aspiration from Agnes Callard's monograph, to shed light on the longer arcs of value changes, by delineating agential long-term strivings towards values that complements, and often precedes and/or follows epiphanies. In Callard's framework:

Aspiration is the diachronic process by which an agent effects change on her own ethical point of view. Aspirants aim to direct their own ethical attention in such a way as to more fully appreciate one value or set of values and to become immune or insensitive to those values that intrinsically conflict with the first set. An aspirant is someone who works to improve her desires, her feelings, her ethical evaluations, and, more generally, her own capacity for responding to reasons.⁴¹

Callard presents aspiration as gradual processes of value-learning, which demand work and effort, and thus contrast with relatively passive epiphanies. With the notions of aspiration and proleptic rationality, Callard seeks to comprehend purposeful value-acquisition as an incremental, authentic, and rational agential process.⁴² Callard contends proleptic rationality, i.e. future-oriented reasons, operates during the pursuit

³⁸ Hugh McGovern et al., 'The Power of Insight: How Psychedelics Solicit False Belief' 2023.

³⁹ Cf. Hobbs, 2021, 66–67.

⁴⁰ In a value realist reading, genuine epiphanies provide epistemic access to really existing values and evaluative properties. However, this is only one possible metaethical position.

⁴¹ Callard, 2018, 143.

⁴² Callard's rationale is to provide an account of value acquisition and self-change that accommodates radical shifts in one's value system without deeming them irrational or inauthentic.

of gradual, long-term value-learning. Hence understood, values that one has not yet sufficiently grasped can legitimately and authentically provide reasons for attempts to understand these values more deeply — reasons not derivable from one's prior valuations. Through the process of aspiration, the initial inadequate and inchoate grasp of the value, along with associated proleptic reasons, gradually transforms into an actual understanding of the value in question.

Callard limits her use of the concept of aspiration to cases where a person's grasp of value is inadequate.⁴³ As a departure from Callard, I fuse the distinction between aspiration towards values one does not yet possess and strivings to 'value-oriented living', i.e. a life aligned with values one already appreciates, subsuming also strivings to deepen the understanding of and pursue values one already appreciates under the concept of aspiration. In this sense aspirations serve as another kind of value realization: to realize what in one's life is what matters most, and to align one's behaviour according to these values. Thus, aspiration has a self-enforcing aspect – our valuations deepen the more conscious effort we spend in aspiring towards and living according to values.

Aspiration involves becoming a different kind of person. First, aspiration involves learning the required skills, habits, understanding and sensibilities to (better) appreciate some value or way of being. Values are often fully graspable only after enculturation and learning, requiring the acquisition of sensibilities and attentional skills to establish contact with values—be it learning to play the piano, understanding philosophy, or developing an appreciation for nature. Secondly, aspiration requires not only learning to appreciate values, but also discarding behaviours and sensibilities that obstruct our connection values we aspire towards, and developing required capabilities, virtues and habits to allow living according to one's deepest values. Aspiration is essential for addressing barriers to a value-centric life, such as extrinsic and intrinsic value conflicts discussed by Callard.⁴⁴ External conflicts arise from competing values vying for our time and energy, while intrinsic conflicts involve valuations and patterns directly at odds, impeding aspiration toward a specific value. Rectifying both internal and external conflicts may be necessary for aspiring toward a particular value.

⁴³ Callard, 2018, 183.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 111–148.

Not all strivings qualify as aspirations. Callard makes a crucial distinction between aspiration and ambition.⁴⁵ Ambitions are pursuits which do not require changes in ourselves or in our valuative understanding but plays out through our already achieved understanding of values and good. While aspiration involves value-learning, other large-scale pursuits like gaining fame, power and wealth lack this transformative quality. Hence, aspiration aligns closely with self-transcendence representing a striving to understand or serve the values in question.⁴⁶

As Callard contends, value change can be rationally pursued. However, we must already have some perspective or reason which makes aspiration desirable. Callard suggests that one's prior valuations nor explicit decision cannot fully account for aspiration, but reasons for aspiration often stem from environmental influences such as education.⁴⁷ Callard implicitly recognizes epiphanies, writing that "the process [of value acquisition] might begin because one is suddenly, experientially confronted with a value one's prior valuations did not lead one to anticipate".⁴⁸ However, she does not pursue this idea further, nor does she have a conception of non-linear and sudden expansion in our grasp of value(s). I contend that such transformative experiences must be addressed for an encompassing understanding of aspiration. Understanding of a value does not deepen in a linear upward slope but is rather akin to a series of ascending hills and hilltops: ascension to vantage points where values are more clearly grasped, and in-between periods where the grasp is weaker. This oscillation in degree of connectedness to values is central for understanding the interplay between epiphanies and aspiration.

Entanglement of epiphanies and aspiration

I suggest epiphanies and aspiration constitute complementary phases of value changes, orienting us towards values. Epiphanies are spontaneously occurring moments of heightened connectedness to values, in which values are experientially vividly present. Aspiration involves willed long-term engagement and active striving toward values, which is central for both creating conditions for epiphanies, and for translating prior

⁴⁵ Ibid., 228–232.

⁴⁶ Cf. Kähönen 2023. However, ambitions can be motivated by self-transcendent values as well – if I donate my fortune to homeless cats, this might not involve any fundamental change in myself or my valuations, but still is a morally praiseworthy act.

⁴⁷ Callard, 2018, 64, 207.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 206.

epiphanic experiences into tangible long-term changes in one's life – from states to traits, as the saying goes.

Epiphanies have the potential to inspire and provide reasons for aspiration, revealing values, possibilities and ways of being that act as attractors for (further) aspiration. On the other hand, I propose that aspiration is often required to actualize the transformative potential epiphanies possess. The potential of epiphanies to a large extent lies in the directions for life that they can reveal. However, our agency and active responses to follow these directions later are required to maintain the connection to values and to flesh out their meaning for our lives. Without subsequent aspiration, epiphanies can fade into mere memories. In later sections, I will more fully elucidate these ideas.

Thus, I argue that as modalities of value change, epiphanies and aspiration are likely to occur together, recursively feeding each other. Epiphanies can function not only as starting points but also outcomes and catalysts or reinforcers of aspirational trajectories. Aspiration can result from epiphanies, but also sets the stage for subsequent epiphanies, as epiphanies occur in contexts of prior valuations and aspirations. Epiphanies are not an endpoint in the understanding of a given value, which might deepen infinitely throughout subsequent aspirations in a person's lifetime. Thus, epiphanies are central phenomena for aspirational agency, and the other way around.

When unfolding repeatedly, epiphanies and aspiration constitute a hermeneutic spiral or feedback cycle, each successive round of epiphanies and aspiring affect each other, in a spiral-like movement.⁴⁹ By unveiling and deepening values, the interplay of epiphanies and aspiration holds the potential to profoundly influence the formation of individual dispositions, identity, desires, habits and ethical perspective, potentially leading to a radical and lasting transformation of sensibilities and valuations.

⁴⁹ Thus, the process is stochastic, i.e. a process which involves both variation and selection from that variation (as occurs both in the processes of learning and evolution) (Bateson 2002).

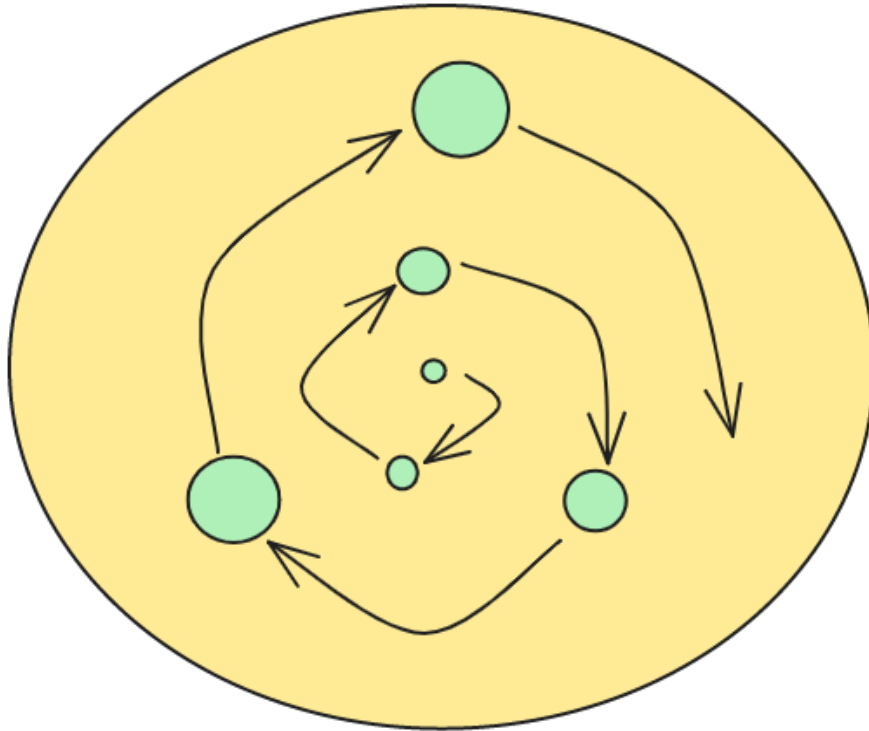


Figure 1: Schematic illustration of hermeneutic spiral between epiphanies and aspiration. Green balloons illustrate epiphanic experiences, and the arrows non-epiphanic trajectories of aspiration, which feed to further and fuller epiphanies and grasp of value(s). Coloured background illustrates the fact that the whole process occurs in a cultural container.

Psychedelic epiphanies

Psychedelic use is associated with a reconnection to one's core values and shifts towards self-transcendent valuations such as prosociality, appreciation of nature, and spirituality, and various other value changes determined by the context.⁵⁰ A theoretical presupposition supported by the available evidence is that observed value changes are intimately related to contents of psychedelic experiences.⁵¹ Although not all psychedelic experiences are epiphanic, nor result in long-lasting changes in values, a significant sub-class of psychedelic experiences are epiphanic, i.e. involve various kinds of valuative peak-experiences which manifest value(s) in our phenomenal experience. As an

⁵⁰ Kähkönen, 2023; Marion Nilsson and Sanna Stalhammar, 'Psychedelics and Inner Dimensions of Sustainability: A Literature Review' 24 January 2024: 4–47; Brian A. Pace and Neşe Devenot, 'Right-Wing Psychedelia: Case Studies in Cultural Plasticity and Political Pluripotency', *Frontiers in Psychology* 12, (10 December 2021), 733185; David Dupuis, 'Psychedelics as Tools for Belief Transmission. Set, Setting, Suggestibility, and Persuasion in the Ritual Use of Hallucinogens', *Frontiers in Psychology* Psychedelic Sociality: Pharmacological and Extrapharmacological Perspectives, (23 November 2021).

⁵¹ Kähkönen, 2023.

example, consider the following quotes from Irvine et al.'s survey of biophilic psychedelic experiences⁵².

Feeling in various ways “one with nature” [...] made me want to preserve it even more because of the better understanding that when nature is hurt, I am hurt. (P 46)

This [using psychedelics] is where I can actually experience unity, and seeing that the wisdom and the beauty are in all that exist. (P 107)

While using LSD, I experienced the beauty of butterflies in the forest, in broken beams of lights through the canopy, I was in awe. I felt as though nature is beautiful and delicate and needs to be protected and respected. (P 137)

In the following, I shall survey intertwined aspects of psychedelic experience which make them epiphanic – which might help us to understand non-psychedelic epiphanies as well. These alterations may crucially affect how our experience is valuatively framed, both concerning what we attend and how we attend. Similarly, they enhance value-ladenness of experience through altering general intensity of the experience, attribution of meaning and salience, and affective capacities. Values are manifested in experiences both by removing barriers and strengthening the capabilities needed for optimal grasp of values – enabling individuals to reconnect with core valuations, amplifying self-transcendent modes of evaluation, and fostering shifts to novel valuative perspectives.

Changes in sense of self

First, I suggest that psychedelic-induced malleability of identity or sense of self contributes to the likelihood for epiphanic experiences. One central locus of our mental schemata is the concept of self, or our identity.⁵³ Valuations are integral to our

⁵² Alexander Irvine et al., ‘Transpersonal Ecodelia: Surveying Psychedelically Induced Biophilia’, *Psychoactives* 2, no. 2, (June 2023), 174–193.

⁵³ Raphaël Millière et al., ‘Psychedelics, Meditation, and Self-Consciousness’, *Frontiers in Psychology* 9, (2018); Haley Maria Dourron, Camilla Strauss, and Peter S. Hendricks, ‘Self-Entropic Broadening Theory: Toward a New Understanding of Self and Behavior Change Informed by Psychedelics and Psychosis’, ed. Eric Barker, *Pharmacological Reviews* 74, no. 4, (1 October 2022), 984–1029; George Deane, ‘Dissolving the Self: Active Inference, Psychedelics, and Ego-Dissolution’, *Philosophy and the Mind Sciences* 1, no. 1, (2020), 1–27.

self-concept as the most abstract goals we have.⁵⁴ Valuations develop partly through identification, and changes in identification can change values.⁵⁵ Thus, if psychedelics make the self-concept more malleable, this implies that also valuations and valuative perspectives become more malleable. Research indeed indicates that psychedelic experiences render our sense of self more malleable, facilitating alterations in our self-concept, body-image, and perceived bodily boundaries.⁵⁶ Neural correlates and cognitive theories of these changes are under active discussion.⁵⁷

Self-transcendent experiences

Research suggests that self-transcendent experiences (STEs), reduced egocentricity and the associated perspective shifts are common in psychedelic experiences.⁵⁸ Importantly, STEs are central for psychedelic-induced value changes.⁵⁹ Self-transcendent experiences (STEs) are defined as experiences in which the sense of separation between self and others/world is reduced and sense of connectedness and meaning enhanced, encompassing experiences such as awe, ego-dissolution and mystical-type experiences.⁶⁰ I suggest that all epiphanies are STEs, and all STEs that have a distinct focus on the object-pole and values are epiphanies – although the exact conceptual

⁵⁴ Hitlin, 2003; Berkman, Livingston, and Kahn, 2017; Callard, 2018.

⁵⁵ Crompton and Kasser, 2010; Bardi and Goodwin, 2011, 279.

⁵⁶ David Dupuis, 'The Psychedelic Ritual as a Technique of the Self: Identity Reconfiguration and Narrative Reframing in the Therapeutic Efficacy of Ayahuasca', *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 12, no. 1, (26 May 2022), 198–216; Raphaël Millière, 'Looking for the Self: Phenomenology, Neurophysiology and Philosophical Significance of Drug-Induced Ego Dissolution', *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 11, (2017); Chris Letheby, *Philosophy of Psychedelics*, (New York, NY, US: Oxford University Press, 2021): 124–159; Neşe Devenot et al., 'Psychedelic Identity Shift: A Critical Approach to Set And Setting', *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 32, no. 4, (2022), 359–399.

⁵⁷ Devon Stoliker et al., 'Neural Mechanisms and Psychology of Psychedelic Ego Dissolution', ed. Eric Barker, *Pharmacological Reviews* 74, no. 4, (1 October 2022), 876–917; Samir Chopra and Chris Letheby, 'Psychedelics and Moral Psychology: The Case of Forgiveness', in *Philosophical Perspectives on Psychedelic Psychiatry*, ed. Chris Letheby and Philip Gerrans, (Oxford University Press, 2024); Deane, 2020.

⁵⁸ Dourron, Strauss, and Hendricks, 2022; R. R. Griffiths et al., 'Psilocybin Can Occasion Mystical-Type Experiences Having Substantial and Sustained Personal Meaning and Spiritual Significance', *Psychopharmacology* 187, no. 3, (August 2006), 268–283; discussion 284–292; Kwonmok Ko et al., 'Psychedelics, Mystical Experience, and Therapeutic Efficacy: A Systematic Review', *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 13, (2022); Pawel Orłowski et al., 'Naturalistic Use of Psychedelics Is Related to Emotional Reactivity and Self-Consciousness the Mediating Role of Ego-Dissolution', *Journal of Psychopharmacology* 36, (27 April 2022); Peter S. Hendricks, 'Awe: A Putative Mechanism Underlying the Effects of Classic Psychedelic-Assisted Psychotherapy', *International Review of Psychiatry (Abingdon, England)* 30, no. 4, (August 2018), 331–342.

⁵⁹ Kähönen, 2023; Nilsson and Stalhammar, 2024; Kelly Paterniti, Stephen Bright, and Eyal Gringart, 'The Relationship Between Psychedelic Use, Mystical Experiences, and Pro-Environmental Behaviors', *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 15 July 2022: 00221678221111024; Irvine et al., 2023.

⁶⁰ D.B. Yaden et al., 'The Varieties of Self-Transcendent Experience', *Review of General Psychology* 212, (2017), 143–160.

relation between these concepts should be further explored.⁶¹ The self-transcendent perspectives STEs foster are essentially ways of relating to the world and objects and framing them in ways which prioritize the intrinsic value of these objects and world instead of their utility to self.⁶² By temporarily dissolving the boundaries of selfhood and reducing salience attributed to the self, psychedelic experiences can help individuals to move beyond egocentric concerns and adopt broader, non-egocentric ways of looking.⁶³ These ways of looking help to put things into perspective and to see the big picture than is possible in ordinary life, leading potentially to a deeper appreciation of the world and self-transcendent values such as the good of nature and other people.

Reframing of the experience and insights

Recent theories propose that psychedelics induce temporary relaxation of prior beliefs and mental schemata, rendering perceptions, behaviours, and beliefs more malleable.⁶⁴ This increased plasticity and disrupting of habitual ways of seeing is associated with possibility of both perceptual and cognitive reframing and emergence of insights and novel perspectives.⁶⁵ On an evaluative level, this reframing might correlate with re-evaluation or evaluative reframing, as many of our conceptions are not purely descriptive, but have evaluative aspects as well.⁶⁶ Insights are a common manifestation of these effects and a proposed mechanism of psychedelic therapy.⁶⁷ Psychedelic insights range from autobiographical to spiritual and metaphysical insights, with sometimes profound and enduring consequences for one's orientation towards life.⁶⁸ Many psychedelic insights can be classified as epiphanies in the technical sense defined above, especially those which concern values and value-laden content, such as societal issues,

⁶¹ However, all STE's might not be epiphanies, although I contend that most of STE's at least implicitly involve evaluative dimensions, as they temporarily deconstruct egocentric frames of valuation. Shifts to a less egocentric perspective is essentially a shift of evaluative gestalts (see Kähkönen 2023).

⁶² Kähkönen, 2023.

⁶³ Ibid.; Chopra and Letheby, 2024.

⁶⁴ R. L. Carhart-Harris and K. Friston, 'REBUS and the Anarchic Brain', *Pharmacological Reviews* 713, (2019), 316–344; Letheby, 2021; R. Zeifman et al., 'From Relaxed Beliefs Under Psychedelics (REBUS) to Revised Beliefs After Psychedelics (REBAS)' 15 March 2023.

⁶⁵ Tulver et al., 2023; Alan K. Davis et al., 'Development of the Psychological Insight Questionnaire among a Sample of People Who Have Consumed Psilocybin or LSD', *Journal of Psychopharmacology (Oxford, England)* 35, no. 4, (April 2021), 437–446; Sam Gandy et al., 'Psychedelics as Potential Catalysts of Scientific Creativity and Insight', *Drug Science, Policy and Law* 8, (1 January 2022), 20503245221097649.

⁶⁶ Murdoch, 2001; Panizza, 2022; Timothy Chappell, 'Moral Perception', *Philosophy* 83, no. 4, (2008), 421–437.

⁶⁷ Davis et al., 2021; Tulver et al., 2023.

⁶⁸ Letheby, 2021; Tulver et al., 2023; Davis et al., 2021; Benny Shanon, 'Moments of Insight, Healing, and Transformation: A Cognitive Phenomenological Analysis', in *The Therapeutic Use of Ayahuasca*, ed. Beatriz Caiuby Labate and Clancy Cavnar, (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer, 2014): 59–75.

nature, importance of one's relationships, one's aspirations and purpose of life, or more general philosophical questions around these issues.⁶⁹ Both cognitive reframing and insights are central aspects of epiphanies according to Chappell.⁷⁰

Enhanced meaning

Psychedelics have been proposed to enhance the intensity and meaningfulness of our experiences, often described as magnifiers of consciousness and intensifiers of mental phenomena and their significance.⁷¹ Theoretically, this has been linked to relaxation of prior beliefs and increased bottom-up information flow to the brain, allowing the present-moment experience to become more salient and less filtered by preconceptions.⁷² Other aspects of psychedelic-enhanced cognition that accompany this enhancement of meaning, such as enhanced symbolic or metaphorical thinking.⁷³ The mode of processing of information in psychedelic-amplified cognition changes in such a way that issues are more easily connected to their wider significance, associations can be made from singular instances to wider wholes and themes, and singular objects can carry much wider and more deeply penetrating meaning than usually.⁷⁴ I suggest both the general psychedelic amplification of meaning as well as the metaphorical dimensions of meaning increases the value-ladenness of experiences and the likelihood of epiphanies – congruent with Chappell's discussion of both propositional and non-propositional aspects of meaning as central to epiphanies.

Affective changes and epistemic feelings

Psychedelics tend to enhance affective processing, leading individuals to experience a wider range of emotions and become more emotionally engaged with the contents of

⁶⁹ Benny Shanon, *The Antipodes of the Mind: Charting the Phenomenology of the Ayahuasca Experience*, 1st edition, (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Leor Roseman et al., 'Relational Processes in Ayahuasca Groups of Palestinians and Israelis', *Frontiers in Pharmacology* 12, (19 May 2021), 607529; Leor Roseman and Nadeem Karkabi, 'On Revelations and Revolutions: Drinking Ayahuasca Among Palestinians Under Israeli Occupation', *Frontiers in Psychology* 12, (2021), 3668; Davis et al., 2021; R. Watts et al., 'Patients' Accounts of Increased "Connectedness" and "Acceptance" After Psilocybin for Treatment-Resistant Depression', *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 575, (2017), 520–564.

⁷⁰ Chappell, 2022, 15–16.

⁷¹ Ido Hartogsohn, 'The Meaning-Enhancing Properties of Psychedelics and Their Mediator Role in Psychedelic Therapy, Spirituality, and Creativity', *Frontiers in Neuroscience* 12, (6 March 2018), 2.

⁷² Carhart-Harris and Friston, 2019; Link R. Swanson, 'Unifying Theories of Psychedelic Drug Effects', *Frontiers in Pharmacology* 9, (2 March 2018), 172.

⁷³ Isabel Wießner et al., 'LSD and Creativity: Increased Novelty and Symbolic Thinking, Decreased Utility and Convergent Thinking', *Journal of Psychopharmacology (Oxford, England)* 36, no. 3, (March 2022), 348–359.

⁷⁴ Shanon, 2002.

their experience.⁷⁵ Emotional breakthroughs and psychodynamic insights have been suggested as one mechanism of psychedelic therapy.⁷⁶ A general enhancement of affect might nudge the experience towards deeper value-ladenness, if values are experienced through affective responses, as Hobbs suggests.⁷⁷ Epiphanies may connect us to values through profound motivational and affective engagement, thus igniting or empowering the deep desires driving our actions.⁷⁸

However, psychedelics do not only amplify affectivity in general, but can engender affective states which are especially conducive towards epiphanic experiences by modulating our ways of attending. First, psychedelic experiences often involve strong positive affect and pleasure, theoretically associated with broadening of attention and self-transcendence.⁷⁹ States of positive affect and pleasure might foster the capacity to open to meaningful experiences, such as aesthetic experiences. Secondly, psychedelics can foster epistemic self-transcendent emotions such as fascination, revelation, sense of sacredness, appreciation, awe and wonder, which foster exploratory, deeply engaged and non-egocentric modes of attention, ways of being and relating to the world – potentially fostering recognition of values and epiphanies.⁸⁰ Thirdly, psychedelics might increase self-transcendent sentiments of love and compassion, emotional empathy and capacity for affective resonance, which may be conducive especially for epiphanies about other persons and nature.⁸¹

⁷⁵ Ibid.; Max Wolff et al., 'Learning to Let Go: A Cognitive-Behavioral Model of How Psychedelic Therapy Promotes Acceptance', *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 11, (2020); Masters and Houston, 1966.

⁷⁶ Leor Roseman et al., 'Emotional Breakthrough and Psychedelics: Validation of the Emotional Breakthrough Inventory', *Journal of Psychopharmacology (Oxford, England)* 33, no. 9, (September 2019), 1076–1087; Davis et al., 2021; Jeffrey Guss, 'A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Psychedelic Experience', *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 32, (7 November 2022), 452–468.

⁷⁷ Hobbs, 2021.

⁷⁸ Chappell, 2022, 112.

⁷⁹ Frederik Bøhling, 'Psychedelic Pleasures: An Affective Understanding of the Joys of Tripping', *International Journal of Drug Policy* 49, (1 November 2017), 133–143; Sarah Hoffman, 'Positive Affect and Letheby's Naturalization of Psychedelic Therapy', *Philosophy and the Mind Sciences* 3, (19 April 2022); Dourron, Strauss, and Hendricks, 2022; Barbara L Fredrickson, 'The Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions', *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 359, no. 1449, (29 September 2004), 1367–1378; Eric L. Garland and Barbara L. Fredrickson, 'Positive Psychological States in the Arc from Mindfulness to Self-Transcendence: Extensions of the Mindfulness-to-Meaning Theory and Applications to Addiction and Chronic Pain Treatment', *Current Opinion in Psychology* 28, (August 2019), 184–191.

⁸⁰ Christopher Kochevar, 'Psychedelic Phenomenology and the Role of Affect in Psychological Transformation', *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 6 November 2023; Chris Letheby, 'Naturalizing psychedelic spirituality', *Zygon* 523, (2017), 623–642; K.W. Tupper, 'Entheogens and Existential Intelligence: The Use of Plant Teachers as Cognitive Tools', *Canadian Journal of Education / Revue Canadienne de l'éducation* 27, no. 4, (2002), 499–516; Panizza, 2022.

⁸¹ Emily Blatchford, Stephen Bright, and Liam Engel, 'Tripping over the Other: Could Psychedelics Increase Empathy?', *Journal of Psychedelic Studies* 4, no. 3, (5 September 2020), 163–170; Thomas Pokorny et al.,

Alterations in attention

Epiphanies are antithesis to being enmeshed in egocentric concerns and framings and involve an open and full attention to the object in question.⁸² As Chappell notes, "gratifications narrow our epistemic focus and our awareness, epiphanies widen them".⁸³ Psychedelics are linked to many changes in attention along epiphanic directions, as evident in previous discussion of mindfulness capacities, self-transcendence and self-transcendent emotions, which all imply decoupling of attention from egocentric concerns. Similarly, cognitive reframing and altered attribution of meaning involve changes in allocation of attention, i.e. changes how a given object or situation is seen, and what is seen as salient or important.

Another recurring theme in the theoretical analysis of psychedelics is the assertion that these experiences reduce attentional filtering and allow individuals to attend to mundane objects that are often overlooked, imbuing them with unusual freshness and significance.⁸⁴ Deane suggests that our sense of self and self-concept is intimately tied to modelling of long-term action plans, and as the temporal thickness of predictive models temporarily is reduced or collapses psychedelic experiences, experience becomes unconstrained by our habitual plans and goals which ordinarily constrain our attention.⁸⁵ Correspondingly, Chappell observes that the objects of epiphanies are often mundane, such as trees or birds, suggesting that much of what could potentially trigger epiphanies in our lived experience remains unnoticed because it is not attentionally selected.⁸⁶

Experientialization of knowledge

Psychedelic experiences have the capacity to present abstract knowledge concretely and vividly. Letheby suggests that psychedelics alter the mode of presentation of knowledge, that is, rather change *how* one knows than impart new knowledge, quoting as an

'Effect of Psilocybin on Empathy and Moral Decision-Making', *The International Journal of Neuropsychopharmacology* 20, no. 9, (1 September 2017), 747–757; Kush V. Bhatt and Cory R. Weissman, 'The Effect of Psilocybin on Empathy and Prosocial Behavior: A Proposed Mechanism for Enduring Antidepressant Effects', *Npj Mental Health Research* 3, no. 1, (20 February 2024), 1–6.

⁸² Panizza, 2022, 6, 168; Maslow, 1970; Chappell, 2022, 204–210; Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt, 'Approaching Awe, a Moral, Spiritual, and Aesthetic Emotion', *Cognition and Emotion* 1 January 2003: 310–311.

⁸³ Chappell, 2022, 120.

⁸⁴ Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009); Carhart-Harris and Friston, 2019; Swanson, 2018; Kochevar, 2023.

⁸⁵ Deane, 2020.

⁸⁶ Chappell, 2022, 14.

example a study participant who claimed psychedelic made their beliefs more tangible: “it made my beliefs more than something to think about, really something to lean on and look forward to”.⁸⁷ Others have observed how psychedelics can make abstract beliefs into experientially vivid realities, phenomena related to concepts of ‘cognitive penetration’ and suggestibility.⁸⁸ I suggest this experientialization of abstract knowledge is central for epiphanies and for making our value-conceptions into vivid, experiential realities. Relevantly, Chappell suggests that the knowledge gained in epiphanies is not primarily propositional and intellectual but objectual, providing a direct awareness of reality in its full valuative richness.⁸⁹

Varieties of psychedelic epiphanies

To sum up, there are various reasons why psychedelic experiences are often epiphanic, such as increase affect-, meaning- and value-ladenness of our experience. However, further research is warranted to delve into the types and taxonomy of epiphanic experiences. Psychedelic experiences can yield a variety of epiphanies depending on dose, set, setting, chance, and the complex internal dynamics of the experience – the aforementioned aspects can be activated to varying extents and in different configurations.⁹⁰ Epiphanies may occur through concrete sensory encounters, imagination, contemplation, sudden insights or mystical-type experiences. The environment and one’s background plays a crucial role in shaping the encountered themes and objects during the trip, for example presence of music and nature can be crucial elements.⁹¹ However, epiphanies are not a simple function of environment influences, as they often are purposeful not only in relation to the present environment,

⁸⁷ Letheby, 2021, 184–185; Tara C. Malone et al., ‘Individual Experiences in Four Cancer Patients Following Psilocybin-Assisted Psychotherapy’, *Frontiers in Pharmacology* 9, (3 April 2018), 4.

⁸⁸ Devenot et al., 2022; Dupuis, 2021; David Dupuis, ‘The Socialization of Hallucinations: Cultural Priors, Social Interactions, and Contextual Factors in the Use of Psychedelics’, *Transcultural Psychiatry* 59, no. 5, (October 2022), 625–637; Erik Davis, *High Weirdness: Drugs, Esoterica, and Visionary Experience in the Seventies*, First paperback edition, (London: Strange Attractor Press, 2019): 28; Chopra and Letheby, 2024.

⁸⁹ Chappell, 2022, 18.

⁹⁰ Cf. the parameters of various alterations of sense of self in Milliere et al. (2018).

⁹¹ Sam Gandy et al., ‘The Potential Synergistic Effects between Psychedelic Administration and Nature Contact for the Improvement of Mental Health’, *Health Psychology Open* 7, no. 2, (1 July 2020), 2055102920978123; Mendel Kaelen et al., ‘The Hidden Therapist: Evidence for a Central Role of Music in Psychedelic Therapy’, *Psychopharmacology* 235, no. 2, (2018), 505–519; Ido Hartogsohn, ‘Constructing Drug Effects: A History of Set and Setting’, *Drug Science, Policy and Law* 3, (2017), 1–17.

but to the wider context of a person's life and worldview, signalling enhanced autopoietic activity of the mind in entropic psychedelic state.⁹²

Modalities of psychedelic value changes

Epiphanic experiences are a notable part of psychedelic value changes. However, the whole trajectory of psychedelic value changes extends beyond the acute experience. Epiphanies cannot be fully understood without considering their embeddedness into diachronic processes of value change, in which aspiration has a central role. I suggest that based on available evidence, psychedelics are often transformative through the intricately linked dual processes of epiphanies and aspiration. To take a step back and ponder on the overall picture, in the context of psychedelic experiences and their impact on values, several possibilities emerge (visualized in Venn-diagram below):

- 1) Some psychedelic experiences lack significant valuative content. These can either: a) have negligible effects on values, or b) foster value change and/or aspiration through other channels than epiphanies.
- 2) Epiphanies may occur during psychedelic experiences. Among them: a) some epiphanies might lead to immediate and enduring changes in sensibilities, valuations, and beliefs without the need for subsequent aspiration. a) Some epiphanies may act as inspiration or catalysts for aspiration, offering a motivating vision that drives subsequent efforts to change and aspire towards a value. c) Some epiphanies lack long-term consequences, possibly due to insufficient integration or aspiration after experience.

⁹² Carhart-Harris and Friston, 2019; Robin Lester Carhart-Harris et al., 'The Entropic Brain: A Theory of Conscious States Informed by Neuroimaging Research with Psychedelic Drugs', *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 8, (2014), 20; Inês Hipólito et al., 'Pattern Breaking: A Complex Systems Approach to Psychedelic Medicine', *Neuroscience of Consciousness* 2023, no. 1, (1 January 2023), niad017.

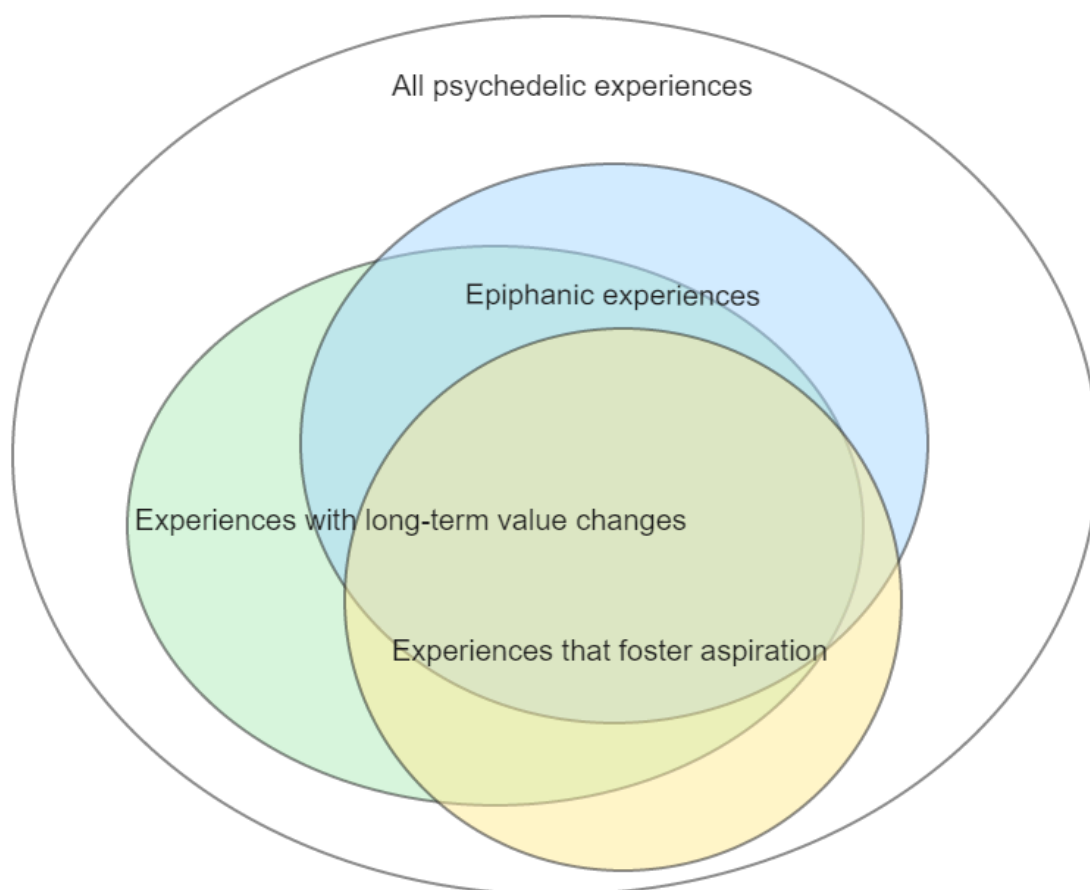


Figure 2: Venn-diagram of various kinds of psychedelic experiences. In the intersection of these categories lies those epiphanic psychedelic experiences which foster aspiration and lead to long-term value changes.

While acknowledging that psychedelic experiences can sometimes bring about instant changes in beliefs or valuative structures, I raise doubts about the frequency of such rapid transformations concerning values. Many deep value changes cannot occur in an instant due to valuations' intricate connection with long-term tendencies such as disposition, motivation, and behaviour – which require extended work to change. This is clearly evident with changes in valuation that involve behaviour changes such as prosocial or environmentally friendly behaviour – which can only be initiated by epiphanies but must be brought into fruition by implementing the changes in one's life. Although some value changes may occur effortlessly after initial experience, aspiration often plays a crucial role in trajectories of value change.⁹³

⁹³ Bardi and Goodwin, 2011; Callard, 2018, 206.

Psychedelics as aspiration enhancers

A primary ethical implication of psychedelic experiences is that they can foster aspiration. Epiphanies can inspire one to aspire through recognition of values which provide moral reasons. However, psychedelics are likely to foster aspiration through other mechanisms such as reducing egocentricity, fostering tendency to change, to process values and aiding in resolving of maladaptive patterns and value conflicts. Thus, I do not assert that aspiration is the sole mechanism for long-term value change induced by psychedelics. Rather, I suggest that various processes such as increased neuronal plasticity can work synergistically with aspiration.

Epiphanies provide reasons to aspire

I suggest, in accord with Chappell, that psychedelic-induced epiphanies can provide moral reasons through values that they unveil, enhancing our motivation to aspire. Chappell argues that epiphanies can provide external reasons and motivation for action, converging with Callard's claim that proleptic rationality underpinning aspirations requires external reasons.⁹⁴ Chappell states:

What they [epiphanies] empower us to do is not only the right thing, but the right thing in the right way and for the right reasons. Epiphanies are visions or insights whose impact on us is usually forceful enough to be creative, and to create many things. One of those things is capacity, and facility, for action that would not have been possible without them: action that is [...] inspired by the epiphanies, and/or action that arises out of gratitude for the epiphanies.⁹⁵

Thus, epiphanies, with their ability to induce momentary perspective shifts, can serve as motivational triggers for aspiration. Temporarily deepened contact with a value can implant a proleptic intuitions about the depth and significance of a given value, leading to emergence, and strengthening of proleptic reasons, motivating action towards or in accordance with values in question, even after the experience has faded and the connection to the value is not as vivid as during the experience. Epiphanies may implant

⁹⁴ Chappell, 2022, 5, 112; Callard, 2018, 97–99.

⁹⁵ Chappell, 2022, 5.

a calling toward the value(s), leaving one afterwards with inspiration and desire, *Eros*, towards further contact with these given values.

These features are illustrated by Frances Vaughan's report of her profound LSD experience, which had repercussions to both her behaviour and ways of seeing after the experience, informing subsequent aspirations:

Although many of the insights that flooded my awareness were forgotten, many remained to influence my life [...] My appreciation of music, art, nature, and human beings has continued to grow since that time [...] I also became aware of a desire to be of service in the world, to make some contribution to humanity through my work. [...] My interest in understanding the experience led me to graduate school to study psychology.⁹⁶

From a slightly different point of view, Chopra and Letheby argue that psychedelic experiences can present moral reasons with a force that is lacking from a mere intellectual reasoning or beliefs, though affect-laden ways of looking they provide:

By modulating users' phenomenal worlds, psychedelics can allow them to respond fully and appropriately to moral reasons – reasons of whose existence they may previously have known, but which were unable to cognitively penetrate or influence their emotional responses. [...] Perhaps psychedelic experiences can promote morally salutary behaviours in multiple domains by breathing fire into motivationally inert moral beliefs, helping them to penetrate affect, attention, and perception. Perhaps psychedelic experiences can remove cognitive obstacles to seeing the world in line with these convictions, rather than merely believing them, and thereby enable us to act accordingly.⁹⁷

If psychedelics foster intuitive and perceptual modes of apprehension of knowledge by transforming (some of) our beliefs *into* experiential intuitions and perceptions, they make known facts morally more motivating by representing them differently. Recent arguments in ethics of attention and moral perception supports the idea that the way

⁹⁶ Francis Vaughan, 'Perception and Knowledge', in *Psychedelic Reflections*, ed. Lester Grinspoon and James B. Bakalar, (New York, N.Y: Human Sciences Press, 1983).

⁹⁷ Chopra and Letheby, 2024, 10, 15.

how knowledge is presented matters for moral motivation. Moral intuitions and moral perceptions are likely to be intrinsically more motivating compared to abstract moral judgements, reasoning, or beliefs, as they intrinsically involve emotive content.⁹⁸ Thus experiential encounters with values might be intrinsically more motivating than, say, abstract philosophical thinking about the same values.

This same logic holds for valuations: psychedelic experiences might reduce the discrepancy between one's value-concepts and actual motivation through this kind of experientialization one's prior abstract valuations, by making valuations vividly alive and tangible, and thus motivationally more impactful.⁹⁹ Thus, epiphanies may reduce the "comprehension-motivation gap", i.e. the mismatch between actual moral motivation and views on what is worth pursuing.¹⁰⁰ As argued, epiphanies can infuse our factual comprehension of the world and values with deep affective force and visceral meaningfulness, deeply impacting psyche and aligning our motivation with the values encountered, in contrast with more intellectually detached forms of knowing. Thus, values previously acknowledged but subsequently disconnected from can be or rediscovered and reconnected to and regain experiential resonance and refreshed significance. Psychedelics can reconnect individuals to the values they already recognize and may reinforce already strong beliefs and valuations.¹⁰¹ Relatedly, epiphanies might contribute to enhanced connectedness to world/objects/others during and after psychedelic experiences.¹⁰²

In this manner, psychedelic epiphanies might catalyse or strengthen existing trajectories of aspiration. Thus, psychedelic experiences can deepen preexisting valuations, often in a purposeful and culturally sanctioned manner, as they seem to heighten the susceptibility to social and cultural influences from one's inground.¹⁰³ Deepening of values and beliefs and other elements of a given worldview through the

⁹⁸ Panizza, 2022, 163; Antti Kauppinen, 'Moral Intuition in Philosophy and Psychology', in *Handbook of Neuroethics*, ed. Jens Clausen and Neil Levy, (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2015): 169–183; Chappell, 2008; Chappell, 2022.

⁹⁹ Kähkönen, 2023.

¹⁰⁰ Vojin Rakić, 'Psilocybin: The Most Effective Moral Bio-Enhancer?', *Bioethics* 37, no. 7, (2023), 683–689.

¹⁰¹ H. T. McGovern et al., 'Do Psychedelics Change Beliefs?', *Psychopharmacology* 4 May 2022; Adam Safron, 'On the Varieties of Conscious Experiences: Altered Beliefs Under Psychedelics (ALBUS)', (PsyArXiv, 30 November 2020).

¹⁰² Rosalind Watts et al., 'The Watts Connectedness Scale: A New Scale for Measuring a Sense of Connectedness to Self, Others, and World', *Psychopharmacology* 8 August 2022; R. L. Carhart-Harris et al., 'Psychedelics and Connectedness', *Psychopharmacology* 235, no. 2, (February 2018), 547–550.

¹⁰³ R.L. Carhart-Harris, M. Kaelen, and M.G. Whalley, 'LSD Enhances Suggestibility in Healthy Volunteers', *Journal of Psychopharmacology* 2015: 232–238; Pace and Devenot, 2021; Dupuis, 2022; Dupuis, 2021.

above discussed mechanism of ‘experientialization of knowledge’ can experientially verify the worldview and tradition one is embedded in, make it motivationally alive, and reinforce respective aspirations.

However, epiphanies are not only reducible to vivifying of one’s existing valuations. Additionally, psychedelics may alter the relative emphasis placed on recognized values; for instance, prioritizing self-transcendent values over others such as power or safety. Moreover, epiphanies can uncover values that were previously unacknowledged or unrecognized, leading to holistic changes in the overall value structure, and sometimes radical alterations in values, modes of being and ways of relating to the world. I suggest psychedelic epiphanies can either reinforce or redirect one’s prior course of aspirations, depending on whether the value encountered is in congruence or in conflict with one’s previous valuations and aspirations. Sometimes one’s valuations and trajectories of aspiration can be significantly altered by unexpected psychedelic encounters with values, which can lead to the need to accommodate one’s prior value system. Rarely, epiphanies can lead to sudden conversions, or other radical changes in life goals and behaviour, as exemplified by cases of Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert, who transformed from Harvard professors to countercultural icons. While epiphanies may sometimes contradict prior valuations and perhaps create or exacerbate value conflicts, they can also open novel valuative perspectives and expand one’s sensibilities without necessarily undermining one’s overarching system of values or worldview, as exemplified by a case of a young business recounted by Albert Hoffman:

He thanked me for the creation of LSD, which had given his life another direction. He had been 100 percent a businessman, with a purely materialistic world view. LSD had opened his eyes to the spiritual aspect of life. Now he possessed a sense for art, literature, and philosophy and was deeply concerned with religious and metaphysical questions.¹⁰⁴

Thus, the way epiphanies affect aspirations is both epistemically and ethically significant aspect of psychedelic experiences.

¹⁰⁴ Albert Hofmann, *LSD, My Problem Child*, trans. Jonathan Ott, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980): 93.

Effortful processing of values and psychological flexibility

Relatedly, psychedelics may enhance aspiration by their fostering effortful processing of values and components of psychological flexibility – some of these processes occur during epiphanic experiences, but they may also be less intensely epiphanic, or occur after psychedelic experiences. First, through insights and increased mindfulness capacities, psychedelic experiences might both make one's attitudes, ways of relating and valuing more accessible to our awareness, and malleable to changes.¹⁰⁵ Secondly, psychedelics can foster beneficial epistemic attitudes that may promote introspection and reflection on what is important in life, such as humility, existential intelligence, awe, and curiosity.¹⁰⁶ These attitudes may encourage constructive inquiry into future possibilities and supporting aspirational endeavours. Congruently, some psychedelic experiences involve reflection on values, and insights concerning value-laden contents.¹⁰⁷ For example, Watts et al. report that a fifth of the subjects in a therapeutic study of psilocybin had insights into the ongoing European refugee crisis.¹⁰⁸ Also, in a study piloting the Psychological Insights Questionnaire, items such as 'awareness of my life purpose, goals, and/or priorities', 'experienced validation of my life, character, values, or beliefs', 'realized the importance of my life' and 'gained a deeper understanding of previously held beliefs and/or values' all received mean ratings of at least 3,5 (on 0-5 scale, N = 1661).¹⁰⁹ Jylkkä et al. found that psychological insight subfactors related to goals and adaptive patterns correlated to increased well-being more strongly than other aspects of psychedelic-induced psychological flexibility.¹¹⁰

Similarly, pursuing value-oriented life is one of the main components of psychological flexibility, and close kin to the notion of 'resource activation' in study of general change mechanisms of psychotherapy. These factors seem to be fostered by psychedelics, especially in therapeutic but also in spiritual and nature settings, possibly

¹⁰⁵ J. Soler et al., 'Exploring the Therapeutic Potential of Ayahuasca: Acute Intake Increases Mindfulness-Related Capacities,' *Psychopharmacology* 233, no. 5, (March 2016), 823–829; Martin Korsbak Madsen et al., 'A Single Psilocybin Dose Is Associated with Long-Term Increased Mindfulness, Preceded by a Proportional Change in Neocortical 5-HT_{2A} Receptor Binding,' *European Neuropsychopharmacology: The Journal of the European College of Neuropsychopharmacology* 33, (April 2020), 71–80; Orłowski et al., 2022; Chopra and Letheby, 2024; Kähkönen, 2023.

¹⁰⁶ Kochevar, 2023; Tupper, 2002; Kähkönen, 2023.

¹⁰⁷ Shanon, 2002, 173–175; Belser et al., 2017, 374; Masters and Houston, 1966, 255.

¹⁰⁸ Watts et al., 2017, 534.

¹⁰⁹ Davis et al., 2021.

¹¹⁰ Jussi Jylkkä, Andreas Krabbe, and Patrick Jern, 'Endorsement of Metaphysical Idealism Mediates a Link between Past Use of Psychedelics and Wellbeing' 24 January 2024.

driving therapeutic change.¹¹¹ The concept of aspiration aligns closely with these processes, underscoring the importance of value-oriented living for both mental health and good life at large.

Another related indirect source of aspiration might be other changes in worldview and beliefs, such as changes in ontological and metaphysical beliefs.¹¹² Although not values in themselves, belief changes can indirectly lead to changes in values and directions of aspiration.¹¹³ For example, if one adopts panpsychist, theistic or animist worldview instead of materialistic and atheistic, this might bring changes into the general understanding of meaning of life and result in re-evaluation of one's aspirations.

Self-transcendence, decentering and reduced egocentricity

Psychedelic experience often involve decentering, disidentification with our ordinary self and various self-transcendent perspectives.¹¹⁴ This may enhance trait self-transcendence and diminishing egocentric perspectives and motivations in the long-term and empower aspirations toward non-egocentric goals.¹¹⁵ Conceptually, trait self-transcendence involves orientation towards self-transcendent values.¹¹⁶ Although the connectedness to values and self-transcendent motivations might be directly caused by epiphanic aspects of the experiences – i.e. recognition of the values – another explanation is long-term reductions in egocentricity. Thus, one possible route of causation is that by reducing egocentric motivations and ambition, psychedelics move

¹¹¹ Max Wolff et al., 'Measuring Psychotherapeutic Processes in the Context of Psychedelic Experiences: Validation of the General Change Mechanisms Questionnaire (GCMQ)', *Journal of Psychopharmacology* 38, (14 May 2024); Max Wolff et al., 'The Acceptance/Avoidance-Promoting Experiences Questionnaire (APEQ): A Theory-Based Approach to Psychedelic Drugs' Effects on Psychological Flexibility', *Journal of Psychopharmacology* 36, no. 3, (1 March 2022), 387–408; Rosalind Watts and Jason B Luoma, 'The Use of the Psychological Flexibility Model to Support Psychedelic Assisted Therapy', *Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science* 15, (1 January 2020), 92–102; Alan K. Davis, Frederick S. Barrett, and Roland R. Griffiths, 'Psychological Flexibility Mediates the Relations between Acute Psychedelic Effects and Subjective Decreases in Depression and Anxiety', *Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science* 15, (1 January 2020), 39–45.

¹¹² Timmermann et al., 2021; Sandeep M. Nayak et al., 'Belief Changes Associated with Psychedelic Use', *Journal of Psychopharmacology (Oxford, England)* 37, no. 1, (January 2023), 80–92; Jylkkä, Krabbe, and Jern, 2024.

¹¹³ Thanks to John Artturi for emphasizing this idea.

¹¹⁴ Chris Letheby, 'Psychedelics and Meditation: A Neurophilosophical Perspective', in *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Meditation*, ed. Rick Repetti, (London: Routledge, 2022).

¹¹⁵ Kähönen, 2023; Kevin O. St. Arnaud and Donald Sharpe, 'Opening to Awe: Psychedelic-Assisted Self-Transcendence and Positive Adult Development', *Journal of Adult Development* 9 July 2022; Dourron, Strauss, and Hendricks, 2022.

¹¹⁶ Kähönen, 2023; Alexandra Kitson et al., 'A Review on Research and Evaluation Methods for Investigating Self-Transcendence', *Frontiers in Psychology* 11, (2020), 547687–547687.

the motivational centre of the individual relatively more towards aspirational pursuits.¹¹⁷⁻¹¹⁸ For example, research on psychological flexibility supports the notion that reductions in maladaptive patterns, which largely consist of rigid egocentric neuroses and desires, can increase the prominence of self-transcendent values.¹¹⁹

General susceptibility for change

Psychedelic experiences might enhance a general susceptibility to change as a person and open an developmental period of enhanced plasticity during which one can learn alternative ways of seeing and evaluating, acting as forks or bifurcation points in the trajectory of an individual's development.¹²⁰ Deane suggests that ego-dissolutions might lead to "a 'resetting' or 'opening' of the affordance landscape, allowing for the possibility of new modes of engagement with the world, oneself, and other people".¹²¹ Thus, psychedelic experiences might promote openness to new perspectives, a sense of expanded possibilities, and the belief in the potential for personal change – fostering processes of identity-formation and behaviour change post-experience.¹²²

Similarly, openness to experience, particularly sub-cluster "openness to values," is associated with both psychedelic use and propensity for value change.¹²³ Increased openness to experiences may facilitate transitions toward intrinsic values.¹²⁴

While not aspiration itself, these shifts, unknowings and broadenings in perspective and identity make aspiration more probable, given aspiration's inherent

¹¹⁷ Callard, 2018, 229; Erich Fromm, *To Have or to Be?*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1976); Dourron, Strauss, and Hendricks, 2022.

¹¹⁸ Psychedelics might also foster self-transcendent ambitions, but this is an empirical question to be investigated separately.

¹¹⁹ Watts and Luoma, 2020; Davis, Barrett, and Griffiths, 2020.

¹²⁰ Michiel van Elk and David Bryce Yaden, 'Pharmacological, Neural, and Psychological Mechanisms Underlying Psychedelics: A Critical Review', *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews* 140, (1 September 2022), 104793; Matthew I. Banks et al., 'Catalysts for Change: The Cellular Neurobiology of Psychedelics', *Molecular Biology of the Cell* 32, no. 12, (1 June 2021), 1135–1144; Ari Brouwer and Robin Lester Carhart-Harris, 'Pivotal Mental States', *Journal of Psychopharmacology* 35, no. 4, (1 April 2021), 319–352.

¹²¹ Deane, 2020, 21.

¹²² Letheby, 2021, 193; Watts and Luoma, 2020, 95; Devenot et al., 2022.

¹²³ Katherine A. MacLean, Matthew W. Johnson, and Roland R. Griffiths, 'Mystical Experiences Occasioned by the Hallucinogen Psilocybin Lead to Increases in the Personality Domain of Openness', *Journal of Psychopharmacology (Oxford, England)* 25, no. 11, (November 2011), 1453–1461; D. Erritzoe et al., 'Effects of Psilocybin Therapy on Personality Structure', *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica* 138, no. 5, (2018), 368–378; David Erritzoe et al., 'Recreational Use of Psychedelics Is Associated with Elevated Personality Trait Openness: Exploration of Associations with Brain Serotonin Markers', *Journal of Psychopharmacology* 33, no. 9, (1 September 2019), 1068–1075.

¹²⁴ Mike Prentice, Tim Kasser, and Kennon M. Sheldon, 'Openness to Experience Predicts Intrinsic Value Shifts after Deliberating One's Own Death', *Death Studies* 42, no. 4, (2018), 205–215; Anat Bardi et al., 'The Structure of Intraindividual Value Change', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 97, (1 November 2009), 913–29.

connection to identity transformation and learning. Given the centrality of valuations to self-concept, profound long-term changes in identity are likely to entail aspiration towards new values. These dynamics are reflected in therapeutic mechanisms of psychedelics, as is evident in subjects' motivations to enact changes post-psychedelic experiences, which often involves exploring new life paths.¹²⁵

Reduction in maladaptive patterns and value conflicts

Psychedelics may also empower aspiration by reducing various hindering barriers. Many maladaptive patterns such as mental health issues can impede aspirational pursuits and exacerbate value conflicts. For example, depression diminishes one's ability to act on core values, while addiction consist of certain behaviours becoming oversalient, hence thwarting other motivations and reasons for action, including value-based ones.¹²⁶ Addicted and depressive individuals often intellectually know how they should act, but experience disparity between these reflectively known reasons and the predominant affective and motivational forces driving behaviour. This incongruence hampers value-based actions despite intellectual awareness of their importance.

Psychedelics may have the potential to alleviate value conflicts and barriers to aspiration by ameliorating mental health issues by promoting well-being, skilful coping with adverse emotions, as well as resolving of internal conflicts.¹²⁷ Awareness and acceptance of one's maladaptive patterns, and reductions in experiential avoidance – all central for psychological flexibility – are often fostered by psychedelics and may help to resolve these patterns and reduce emotional reactivity which impede connectedness to values and value-oriented life.¹²⁸ Through enhanced introspection,

¹²⁵ Devenot et al., 2022; Tehseen Noorani et al., 'Psychedelic Therapy for Smoking Cessation: Qualitative Analysis of Participant Accounts', *Journal of Psychopharmacology (Oxford, England)* 32, no. 7, (2018), 756–769; Belser et al., 2017; Thomas C. Swift et al., 'Cancer at the Dinner Table: Experiences of Psilocybin-Assisted Psychotherapy for the Treatment of Cancer-Related Distress', *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 57, no. 5, (September 2017), 488–519.

¹²⁶ I do not intend to claim that depressed and addicted individuals are morally responsible for their afflictions.

¹²⁷ John R. Kelly et al., 'Psychedelic Therapy's Transdiagnostic Effects: A Research Domain Criteria (RDoC) Perspective', *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 12, (17 December 2021), 800072; Jacob S. Aday et al., 'Long-Term Effects of Psychedelic Drugs: A Systematic Review', *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews* 113, (1 June 2020), 179–189; Guss, 2022.

¹²⁸ Davis, Barrett, and Griffiths, 2020; Orlowski et al., 2022; Richard J. Zeifman et al., 'Post-Psychedelic Reductions in Experiential Avoidance Are Associated With Decreases in Depression Severity and Suicidal Ideation', *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 11, (2020), 782; Wolff et al., 2020.

mindfulness-capacities, decentering and insights psychedelics might help to illuminate dysfunctional patterns, and help to perceive and implement alternative possibilities.¹²⁹

Based on anecdotal and theoretical evidence, psychedelics may also help to resolve value conflicts by facilitating psychodynamic integration and dialogue between various evaluative perspectives and valuations one holds. In essence, the multitude of a person's evaluations, affects, beliefs and behavioural tendencies can be out of sync with each other. Psychedelic experience might help with balancing and integrating the psyche as a whole through relaxed prior beliefs, increased entropy and autopoiesis, improving communication among different neural networks – manifested as resurgence of unconscious material and enhanced integration between various aspects of our psyche such as intellect and emotions.¹³⁰ This process might allow for balancing and integration of conflicting evaluative perspectives and value conflicts holistically on multiple levels, which is not achievable through ordinary deliberation alone.¹³¹ A concrete example is observation that in psychedelic studies of addiction not only the addiction weakens but other competing issues become more important.¹³² This might occur as a result of a general integration of the whole salience landscape and cognitive hierarchy: the object of addiction becomes less important *because* its salience is tuned and re-evaluated in relation to other issues and values. Thus, psychodynamic resolving of value conflicts and formation of clearer values might often be facets of the same unified autopoietic process.

Thus, psychedelics may foster aspiration through many routes. There are likely to be multiple intertwining and reinforcing feedbacks between these aforementioned processes. The resolving of inner conflicts and other therapeutic effects of psychedelics are likely to increase well-being, which in turn can foster self-transcendent values and capacity to live valued life – and in turn, self-transcendence can help to further transcend suffering and savour in positive sources of meaning.¹³³ Thus, increased well-being and self-transcendence can in a self-reinforcing manner make epiphanies more likely and leave more attention and resources for aspirations towards core values.

¹²⁹ Davis et al., 2021; Madsen et al., 2020; Letheby, 2021, 193.

¹³⁰ Carhart-Harris et al., 2014; Hipólito et al., 2023; Guss, 2022; Michael Winkelman, 'Psychointegrators Multidisciplinary Perspectives on the Therapeutic Effects of Hallucinogens', *Complementary Health Practice Review* 6, (2001), 219–237.

¹³¹ Callard, 2018, 111–147; Chopra and Letheby, 2024.

¹³² Noorani et al., 2018.

¹³³ Rakić, 2023; Brian Ge and Fan Yang, 'Transcending the Self to Transcend Suffering', *Frontiers in Psychology* 14, (7 July 2023); Garland and Fredrickson, 2019.

Aspiration as continuation and integration of epiphanies

Often, the transformative component of so-called 'life-changing experiences' are aspirations unfolding in a person's life after pivotal experiences. While psychedelics may inspire and foster aspiration, aspiration is required post-experience, as value changes often require prolonged efforts to change long-term dispositions and habits.¹³⁴ Even fabulously revelatory experiences rarely do the work of inner change for us, nor do they actualize the new-found valuations and sensibilities. Psychedelics can provide impetus and direction, but the aspirational journey must continue beyond the psychedelic encounter. Transformative experiences should not be seen as isolated events but as catalysts for extended trajectories of aspirational change. Efforts to aspire might be required for optimal utilization of the 'window of plasticity' caused by psychedelic experiences.

I propose two essential reasons why epiphanies require aspiration. Firstly, aspiration is required to actively cultivate the values encountered in one's life, behaviour, and sensibilities. This requires ongoing effort to maintain a connection to the value, uphold its significance, and align one's actions and attitudes with it. Secondly, aspiration is crucial because still after epiphany various barriers may impede leading a value-centred life. Aspiration involves navigating through entrenched habits, perspectives and tendencies conflicting with the value, ultimately aligning one's life with the embraced values – which might involve working on one's habits, desires, and capacity to uphold values. Conflicting habits and ingrained ways of perceiving and acting can quickly reassert themselves in our habitual salience landscape, even after initial epiphany.¹³⁵ Aspiration is crucial for overcoming these conflicts, requiring long-term work of unlearning habits and shedding conflicting valuation. Epiphanies alone cannot resolve mental health issues or unvirtuous tendencies, such as addictive desires or egocentrism, which often must be dealt with to maintain a connection to values. Or, for instance, an epiphany about nature does not magically eradicate consumeristic desires or resign one from an advertisement company. Thus, aspiration is required to consolidate perspectives found through epiphanies both by continuing to deepen the connection to the value in question, and by purifying inconsistent evaluative perspectives away.

¹³⁴ Bardi and Goodwin, 2011.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

Aspiration as integration of psychedelic epiphanies

Thus, I propose that aspiration serves as a central mechanism to integrate value-laden psychedelic experiences into one's life. The notion of 'integration' refers to the active efforts required post-psychedelic experience to optimally process the experience to learn and benefit from the experience, generally taken to be central for sustaining and actualizing the insights gleaned from these experiences.¹³⁶ While integration discussions typically focus on therapeutic or spiritual transformation, I argue that this concept extends to psychedelic encounters with values, and often involves aspirations. Whether psychedelics lead to positive adult development has been found to be mediated by intentions and integration, and same is likely for values.¹³⁷

Concerning the whole concept of integration, I suggest that integration of a transformative experience does not consist only of reflection on the *experiences* but of meaningful aspirations as well, fostering individuals to work towards integrating values previously overlooked or not fully integrated into their lives, valuations and worldview. Without considering aspiration, we risk overlooking a central ethical aspect of psychedelic use, as is evident in a tension between recent models of integration.

In their review of integration models and modalities, Bathje et al. note that many integration models primarily address internal dimensions of the psychedelic experience, focusing on domains like 'mind', 'somatic', and 'spiritual'.¹³⁸ However, some models also acknowledge external focus and behavioural changes as integral to integration (classified by Bathje et al. under domains 'lifestyle', 'relational/communal', and 'natural world'). I suggest especially these external changes reflect shifts in valuations and thus entail aspiration. Convergingly, to support these external changes some frameworks for integration contain distinctly aspirational pursuits and goals, such as 1) cultivating virtues, and beauty and love, 2) activism, volunteering and donating and community service, 3) cultivating contact with nature, and 4) value-oriented living.¹³⁹

From a normative viewpoint, I argue that integration of epiphanies often *should* go beyond simply reflecting on experiences and involve directing one's life according to these values through subsequent aspirations. Aspiration is crucial for taking psychedelic epiphanies and their normative and ethical force seriously. An epiphany into the

¹³⁶ Geoff J. Bathje, Eric Majeski, and Mesphina Kudowor, 'Psychedelic Integration: An Analysis of the Concept and Its Practice', *Frontiers in Psychology* 13, (2022).

¹³⁷ St. Arnaud and Sharpe, 2022.

¹³⁸ Bathje, Majeski, and Kudowor, 2022, 7.

¹³⁹ Bathje, Majeski, and Kudowor, 2022.

significance of compassion or virtues, or to intrinsic value of nature should lead to corresponding aspirations.¹⁴⁰ Aspiration is sometimes a normatively required response to epiphanies – although it's important to acknowledge that epiphanies vary greatly, and recognizing values doesn't always require outward action. Callard claims we are praiseworthy for successful aspiration and blameworthy for the failure to aspire.¹⁴¹ To some extent, we have moral responsibility for our ethical growth, i.e. becoming the kind of person we wish to be. Similarly, if we use psychedelics and fail to aspire, i.e. do not adequately respond to the valuative content and moral reasons provided by these experiences, we may be responsible for this – although our capacity to aspire also hinges on multiple conditions, and how to distinguish reasonable moral responsibility from supererogatory demands is difficult to delineate.

Aspirational and non-aspirational uses of psychedelics

Neither psychedelic experiences nor aspirations in general cannot be understood without considering the wider cultural context or milieu surrounding these experiences and the aspirant. When comparing various contexts and types of psychedelic use, the motivation to use psychedelics aspirationally varies greatly among individuals and various cultural settings, with a significant portion of psychedelic use being inherently aspirational. Broadly speaking, we can classify psychedelic use into three categories based on the extent of aspirational motivation:

Recreational and adventurous use of psychedelics. Psychedelic use is not always driven by aspiration but can be recreationally or adventurously motivated. Recreational use involves using psychedelics primarily for enjoyment. Adventurous use involves exploration without an aspirational motive. While adventuring, individuals may encounter values unintentionally, leading to potential epiphanies and aspirations as unintended side effects. Callard contrasts adventures and aspiration, noting that adventures are not aimed at any specific values, whereas aspiration involves a deliberate effort to change oneself in a specific way, not merely being open to potential changes.¹⁴²

Maiuetic use. In between adventurous and purposeful aspirational use lies what we might call 'maieutic use' of psychedelics. 'Maieutic end' is defined by Schmidtz as an end achieved by choosing other more refined ends.¹⁴³ Individuals engage in maieutic use

¹⁴⁰ For fitting examples, see Shanon, 2002, 174; Vaughan, 1983.

¹⁴¹ Callard, 2018, 232–236.

¹⁴² Ibid., 7–8, 22–23.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 86; David Schmidtz, 'Choosing Ends', *Ethics* 104, no. 2, (1994), 226–251.

with the expectation that the experience will reveal something valuable for life afterward, even if the specific direction isn't known beforehand. Psychedelics are often used in this manner: to clarify one's valuations or directions in life rather than pursue a particular value. Striving to realize or clarify what is important can be seen as a form of meta-level aspiration driving psychedelic use.

Aspirational use. Quite often psychedelics are used with a specific aspirational intention and context centred around certain values. Aspirational motivation thus unifies various contexts and motivations for psychedelic use such as therapy, spirituality, or artistic exploration. For example, Gail Bradbrook, co-founder of Extinction Rebellion, has recounted her distinctively aspirational use of psychedelics: "the reason why I pushed my consciousness to such an extreme wasn't just to do the inner work on myself - I wanted answers to how I could bring about social change. ... It was a specific prayer for what I called the 'codes for social change.'"¹⁴⁴ Notably, culturally orchestrated value-education or revitalization has been one central way to use psychedelics, for example in the Bwiti religion or in the Native American Church.¹⁴⁵ This type of psychedelic use is often part of wider transformative pursuits and integrated with other aspirational practices, such as rituals or spiritual exercises. Psychedelics may be most effective in aspirational use when used within a supportive ecology of practices designed to foster aspirational change. This is supported by a recent trial by Griffiths et al. exploring interaction of psychedelics and meditation practices, where combination of these two factors showed robust interactive positive effects on variety of measures.¹⁴⁶

Directions of psychedelic aspirations

Certain valuations, particularly self-transcendent ones, appear to be common outcomes of psychedelic experiences, at least within the common research settings.¹⁴⁷ However, evidence suggests that psychedelic value changes are to some extent dependent on the cultural contexts and can amplify diverse cultural values, ranging from traditional values

¹⁴⁴ As recounted in her opinion piece 'How Psychedelics Helped to Shape Extinction Rebellion' <https://www.whatisemerging.com/opinions/psychedelics-and-social-change> (Accessed 15.2.2024).

¹⁴⁵ Brian D. Earp, 'Psychedelic Moral Enhancement', *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 83, (2018), 415–439; Roseman and Karkabi, 2021; Joseph D. Calabrese, *A Different Medicine: Postcolonial Healing in the Native American Church*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Marlene Dobkin de Rios, *Hallucinogens : Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, (Prospect Heights, Ill: Waveland Pr Inc, 1996).

¹⁴⁶ Roland R Griffiths et al., 'Psilocybin-Occasioned Mystical-Type Experience in Combination with Meditation and Other Spiritual Practices Produces Enduring Positive Changes in Psychological Functioning and in Trait Measures of Prosocial Attitudes and Behaviors', *Journal of Psychopharmacology* 32, no. 1, (1 January 2018), 49–69.

¹⁴⁷ Kähönen, 2023.

of indigenous societies to right-wing psychedelia.¹⁴⁸ Thus, the question of whether psychedelic experiences intrinsically and cross-culturally foster certain valuation, or simply amplify valuations and aspirations present in oneself and in one's cultural surroundings requires further research is still under investigation – and these options are not mutually exclusive.

A plausible hypothesis is that psychedelic epiphanies can inspire multiple kinds of aspirations, depending on the theme of epiphany, which depends on multiple factors such as the background of the person, context of the experience and on the intrinsic features of psychedelic experiences. What is certain is that psychedelics often serve as one element within broader aspirational projects that already involve various valuations, sensibilities and practices. Commonly reported aspirations in the literature (mostly based on western and educated populations) concern:

1. Spirituality, self-transcendence and wisdom
2. Prosociality, compassion and connection to others
3. Connection to nature and environmentalism
4. Politics and society
5. Art and aesthetic values
6. Therapy, healing and well-being
7. Intellectual pursuits

Spirituality, self-transcendence and wisdom

Aspirations related to spirituality and wisdom are commonly associated with psychedelic use, both as a motive for and as a result of the experiences. Although the concept of "spiritual" may face challenges when applied cross-culturally, a significant proportion of both Western and non-Western approaches to psychedelic use have been broadly spiritual or entheogenic in nature: notable examples involve movements such as Santo Daime, Uniao de Vegetal, and the Native American Church, as well as indigenous and mestizo shamanism.¹⁴⁹ Spiritually motivated psychedelic use often involves aspirations towards wisdom, virtues and spiritual insights, and occurs as part of a

¹⁴⁸ Pace and Devenot, 2021; Dupuis, 2021; Dupuis, 2022.

¹⁴⁹ de Rios, 1996; Carl A.P. Ruck et al., 'Entheogens', in *Carl A.P. 2008 The Road to Eleusis Unveiling the Secret of the Mysteries*. North Atlantic Books, ed. R.Gordon Wasson, Albert Hofmann, and Ruck, 3. edition 1., (Berkeley, California, 2008): 137–139; Robert Jesse, 'A Survey of the Entheogens', in *Zig-zag Zen Buddhism and psychedelics*, ed. Allan Hunt Badiner and Alex Grey, (Santa Fe: NM Synergetic Press, 2015); Osto, 2016.

broader traditions, which provide frameworks for individuals to link self-transcendent experiences into ethical and altruistic aspirations, enhancing the likelihood of positive value changes.

Spiritual aspiration fostered by self-transcendent experiences and modes of being often leads to adaptation of other practice modalities such as meditation – spiritual practices naturally complement self-transcendent experiences. Recent research gives a scientific rationale for combining psychedelics and meditation in aspirations towards wisdom, as meditation and psychedelics seem to have synergistic effects in reducing emotional reactivity and enhancing awareness, compassion, empathy, prosocial attitudes, and well-being.¹⁵⁰ Simonsson & Goldberg found that psychedelic use and experiences of ego dissolution correlate with increased motivation for meditation and reduced barriers to practice.¹⁵¹ Additionally, studies indicate both phenomenological and neurological similarities between the effects of meditation and psychedelics.¹⁵²

Prosociality, compassion and connection to others

Recent empirical studies indicate that psychedelic experiences often lead to shifts in valuations towards more prosocial attitudes and behaviour.¹⁵³ These experiences commonly involve experiences of *communitas*, identity fusion, increased sense of social connectedness and sentiments of common humanity.¹⁵⁴ Similarly experiences of deep compassion and love and forgiveness are relatively common, signalling a shift from self-centeredness to concern for others.¹⁵⁵ Increased empathy and reduced separation between self and other might underpin many of these changes, which may lead to

¹⁵⁰ Griffiths et al., 2018; Paweł Holas and Justyna Kamińska, 'Mindfulness Meditation and Psychedelics: Potential Synergies and Commonalities', *Pharmacological Reports* 75, no. 6, (1 December 2023), 1398–1409; Soler et al., 2016; Madsen et al., 2020; Orłowski et al., 2022; Garland and Fredrickson, 2019.

¹⁵¹ Otto Simonsson and Simon B. Goldberg, 'Linkages between Psychedelics and Meditation in a Population-Based Sample in the United States', *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 55, no. 1, (9 January 2022), 11–18.

¹⁵² Letheby, 2022; Millière et al., 2018.

¹⁵³ Bhatt and Weissman, 2024; Patrick C. Dolder et al., 'LSD Acutely Impairs Fear Recognition and Enhances Emotional Empathy and Sociality', *Neuropsychopharmacology: Official Publication of the American College of Neuropsychopharmacology* 41, no. 11, (October 2016), 2638–2646; Kähkönen, 2023.

¹⁵⁴ Watts et al., 2017; Watts et al., 2022; H. Kettner et al., 'Psychedelic *Communitas*: Intersubjective Experience During Psychedelic Group Sessions Predicts Enduring Changes in Psychological Wellbeing and Social Connectedness', *Frontiers in Pharmacology* 12, (25 March 2021), 623985; Hannes Kettner et al., *Improvements in Well-Being Following Naturalistic Psychedelic Use and Underlying Mechanisms of Change in Older Adults: A Prospective Cohort Study* 2024; Martha Newson et al., "I Get High With a Little Help From My Friends" - How Raves Can Invoke Identity Fusion and Lasting Co-Operation via Transformative Experiences', *Frontiers in Psychology* 12, (2021); Roseman et al., 2021.

¹⁵⁵ Malone et al., 2018; Shanon, 2002; Chappell, 2022; Kähkönen, 2023; Chopra and Letheby, 2024.

universal sense of concern towards all humans.¹⁵⁶ Thus, psychedelics might often foster aspirations towards kindness, connection, and care towards others, and perhaps more generally a turn towards relational worldviews and values instead of individualistic ones.¹⁵⁷

Connection to nature and environmentalism

Psychedelics can enhance nature relatedness and environmentally friendly behaviour, and intention to connect to nature is a common aspiration underpinning psychedelic use. Nilsson & Stalhammar provide a comprehensive review of studies published until 2020 linking psychedelics to inner dimensions of sustainability, including heightened nature relatedness and environmental concern.¹⁵⁸ Irvine et al. report many nature-related epiphanies and subsequent lifestyle changes, and propose that psychedelics can cultivate biophilia, or a love of nature, by fostering a passionate and protective connection with the natural world, even among individuals not previously oriented towards nature.¹⁵⁹ Founder of Deep Ecology Arne Naess highlighted the role of boundary-dissolving experiences as pivotal for developing a deep ecological perspective, emphasizing their impact on identity, and the role of both feeling and experience in understanding values.¹⁶⁰ Psychedelic research supports this notion, as psychedelics STE's can foster identification with nature and encounters with its intrinsic value, leading to aspirations for greater harmony with the natural world.¹⁶¹ These shifts in valuations are likely to involve aspirations to maintain a connection with nature post-experience and engage in environmentally-friendly behaviours.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁶ V. Mulukom, R. Patterson, and M. Elk, "Broadening Your Mind to Include Others: The Relationship between Serotonergic Psychedelic Experiences and Maladaptive Narcissism", *Psychopharmacology* 237, no. 9, (2020), 2725–2737; Blatchford, Bright, and Engel, 2020; Dolder et al., 2016; Pokorny et al., 2017.

¹⁵⁷ Chopra and Letheby, 2024; Joshua Falcon, 'Designing Consciousness: Psychedelics as Ontological Design Tools for Decolonizing Consciousness', *Design and Culture* 13, no. 2, (4 May 2021), 143–163.

¹⁵⁸ Nilsson and Stalhammar, 2024.

¹⁵⁹ Irvine et al., 2023.

¹⁶⁰ Arne Johan Vetlesen, 'Ethics and Value in Naess' Ecophilosophy: A Realist Perspective', *Worldviews* 21, no. 3, (2017), 251–261; A. Naess, 'Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World', in *The Selected Works of Arne Naess*, ed. H. Glasser and A. Drengson, vol. X, (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005): 515–530.

¹⁶¹ M. Forstmann and C. Sagioglou, 'Lifetime Experience with Classic Psychedelics Predicts Pro-Environmental Behavior through an Increase in Nature Relatedness', *Journal of Psychopharmacology* 318, (2017), 975–988; Hannes Kettner et al., 'From Egoism to Ecoism: Psychedelics Increase Nature Relatedness in a State-Mediated and Context-Dependent Manner', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 16, no. 24, (2019), 5147; Kähönen, 2023.

¹⁶² Paterniti, Bright, and Gringart, 2022; Christina Sagioglou and Matthias Forstmann, 'Psychedelic Use Predicts Objective Knowledge about Climate Change via Increases in Nature Relatedness', *Drug Science, Policy and Law* 8, (1 January 2022), 20503245221129803.

Politics and society

Psychedelics have been credited with empowering societal and political aspirations. For instance, Gail Bradbrook, co-founder of Extinction Rebellion, has openly shared how psychedelics inspired the founding of the movement.¹⁶³ Similarly, John Seed, an Australian environmentalist, cited psychedelic experiences as pivotal in his transition to full-time activism.¹⁶⁴ Roseman and Karkabi discuss 'prophetic experiences' in Israel-Palestine ayahuasca ceremonies, which involved political insights and inspired attendees towards political action, contrary to the expectations in apolitical New Age ceremonial culture.¹⁶⁵ Psychedelics have historical ties to countercultural utopianism and anti-hegemonic tendencies, epitomized by Timothy Leary's famous phrase "turn on, tune in, drop out."¹⁶⁶ Psychedelics have been also linked to cultural revitalization and decolonial strivings. Both ayahuasca and peyote use among indigenous people in South- and North-America have played a role in anticolonial strivings to revitalize indigenous cultures.¹⁶⁷ Empirical studies suggest psychedelics may foster liberal political attitudes.¹⁶⁸ However, political aspirations are likely to be affected by the background of the user, as there are contradictory cases of further radicalization of right-wing individuals after psychedelic use.¹⁶⁹

Art and aesthetic values

The connection between psychedelics, creativity, and aesthetic experiences and artistic aspirations is deeply ingrained in popular imagination. According to research, psychedelics often involve profound aesthetic experiences, and might foster creativity,

¹⁶³ Similarly, I have heard a personal account from one of the key figures of the Finnish branch of XR how their decision to devote to full-time activism occurred because of psychedelic experience.

¹⁶⁴ As recounted in a lecture organized by Entheogenesis Australis: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MGJo3J8hfUA&ab_channel=EntheogenesisAustralis-EntheoTV (Accessed 7.11.2023).

¹⁶⁵ Roseman and Karkabi, 2021.

¹⁶⁶ Stevens, 1987; Martin A. Lee and Bruce Shlain, *Acid Dreams: The Complete Social History of LSD: The CIA, the Sixties, and Beyond*, Rev. Evergreen ed, (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1992).

¹⁶⁷ Esther Jean Langdon, 'The Revitalization of Yajé Shamanism among the Siona: Strategies of Survival in Historical Context', *Anthropology of Consciousness* 27, no. 2, (2016), 180–203; Calabrese, 2013; Falcon, 2021.

¹⁶⁸ T. Lyons and R.L. Carhart-Harris, 'Increased Nature Relatedness and Decreased Authoritarian Political Views after Psilocybin for Treatment-Resistant Depression', *Journal of Psychopharmacology* 327, (2018), 811–819; Matthew M. Nour, Lisa Evans, and Robin L. Carhart-Harris, 'Psychedelics, Personality and Political Perspectives', *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 49, no. 3, (27 May 2017), 182–191.

¹⁶⁹ Pace and Devenot, 2021.

probably especially with individuals with prior artistic aspirations.¹⁷⁰ Both in indigenous and Western context, psychedelics have influenced the creation of distinct styles of visual art and music, from Amazonian *icaros* to certain styles of electronic music and bands like the Beatles, Grateful Dead, and Pink Floyd.¹⁷¹

Therapy, well-being and health

Therapy often entails aspirations to change as an individual. For persons afflicted with mental health disorders, psychedelics might give glimpses of states of well-being, hope and open possibilities of alternative ways of being and behaving.¹⁷² Psychedelics foster a variety of therapeutic processes, such as psychological flexibility, resource activation, insights into maladaptive pattern and emotional breakthroughs and often involve experiences of deep self-compassion for oneself.¹⁷³ Further, psychedelics have been observed to incline users to adapt to a more healthy behaviour and way of life.¹⁷⁴

Intellectual curiosity and existential intelligence

Psychedelics can sometimes ignite curiosity into areas of human life hitherto overlooked, as exemplified by the earlier quoted case of a young businessman recounted by Albert Hofmann. Similar stories of inspiration towards philosophical thinking or changing of one's intellectual trajectory can be found in the literature.¹⁷⁵ Perhaps sometimes worldview-shaking experiences described as 'ontological shock' can raise

¹⁷⁰ Shanon, 2002; Masters and Houston, 1966; Gandy et al., 2022; Oscar Janiger and Marlene Dobkin de Rios, 'LSD and Creativity', *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 1 January 1989; Wießner et al., 2022.

¹⁷¹ Alex Grey, *The Mission of Art*, 20th anniversary edition, (Boulder: Shambhala, 2018); Alex Grey, 'Vajravisoin', in *Zig-zag Zen Buddhism and psychedelics*, ed. Allan Hunt Badiner and Alex Grey, (Santa Fe: NM Synergetic Press, 2015); Luis Eduardo Luna and Pablo Amaringo, *Ayahuasca Visions: The Religious Iconography of a Peruvian Shaman*, (Berkeley, Calif: North Atlantic Books, 1999); Doc Arkko, Timo Komulainen, and Henry Soinnunmaa, eds., *Psykedeeelit Ja Luovuus Kotimaisessa Kuvataiteessa*, (Psykedeeelisen sivistyksen liitto ry, 2024); Michael Hicks, *Sixties Rock: Garage, Psychedelic, and Other Satisfactions*, First Illinois paperback, (Urbana Chicago Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Patrick Lundborg, *Psychedelia: An Ancient Culture, A Modern Way of Life*, First edition, (Lysergia, 2012); Katarina Jerotic, Peter Vuust, and Morten L. Kringelbach, 'Psychedelia: The Interplay of Music and Psychedelics', *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1531, no. 1, (2024), 12–28.

¹⁷² Letheby, 2021; Deane, 2020.

¹⁷³ Wolff et al., 2024; Davis et al., 2021; Roseman et al., 2019; Gabrielle Agin-Liebes et al., 'Reports of Self-Compassion and Affect Regulation in Psilocybin-Assisted Therapy for Alcohol Use Disorder: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis', *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors: Journal of the Society of Psychologists in Addictive Behaviors* 38, no. 1, (February 2024), 101–113; Elisabet Domínguez-Clavé et al., 'Ayahuasca May Help to Improve Self-Compassion and Self-Criticism Capacities', *Human Psychopharmacology: Clinical and Experimental* 37, no. 1, (2022), e2807.

¹⁷⁴ Pedro Teixeira et al., 'Psychedelics and Health Behaviour Change', *Journal of Psychopharmacology* 36, (29 May 2021), 026988112110085.

¹⁷⁵ Osto, 2016, 111; Shanon, 2002, 160–181; Masters and Houston, 1966, 103.

fundamental philosophical questions that previously did not seem relevant to the person, leading to a philosophical quest to understand one's mind and reality more deeply. Convergingly, Tupper proposes that psychedelics may increase existential intelligence, which includes deep concern with philosophical and religious questions.¹⁷⁶

Moral relevance of psychedelic value changes

Moral enhancement through epiphanies and aspiration

Before concluding, I want to stress wider moral relevance of the phenomena discussed above. I suggest attending to both epiphanies and aspiration are central for understanding the ethical (including ecological, relational and societal) dimensions of psychedelic experiences. Without adequate attention to these aspects, we might conceive psychedelic experiences and their implications in overtly internalistic, psychologized and individualistic terms, and miss the potential these experiences hold for recognition of values that transcend the self and motivators for life oriented towards these values – including but not limited ecological, relational, spiritual and universalistic values.

The capacity of psychedelics to induce epiphanies and foster aspiration holds moral significance relevant for discussions on psychedelic moral enhancement—whether psychedelics could enhance ethical capacities in humans.¹⁷⁷ In our world plagued by value blindness – exemplified by power games and rampant consumerism, inequalities and multiple overlapping crises – means to foster the recognition of intrinsic values and to help to align the productive activity of humans towards respecting these values would be morally commendable. If psychedelics have the power to foster epiphanies and aspiration, psychedelics may serve as potential tools of value-education by aiding recognition of various values in the world and lining of motivation and valuations with these values. In the light of my argument, psychedelic use to foster aspirational processes and ethical learning through epiphanies is *prima facie* justified form of moral enhancement, as it is both context-sensitive and retains individual autonomy.¹⁷⁸ However, many ethical issues and risks remain to be addressed.

¹⁷⁶ Tupper, 2002.

¹⁷⁷ Earp, 2018; Brian D. Earp, Thomas Douglas, and Julian Savulescu, 'Moral Neuroenhancement', in *The Routledge Handbook of Neuroethics*, ed. L. Syd M. Johnson and Karen S. Rommelfanger, (New York (NY): Routledge, 2017); Rakić, 2023.

¹⁷⁸ Cf. Earp, Douglas, and Savulescu, 2017.

Moral risks and questions

It is important to stress that psychedelics are not magic pills, and do not necessarily make people better, and the observed value changes are statistically modest. Epiphanies are not guaranteed, nor do all psychedelic experiences lead to morally praiseworthy outcomes. Perhaps most psychedelic experiences are morally neutral or inconsequential, and there are anecdotal cases of ego-inflation and other morally suspect outcomes of psychedelic use which deserve further study. Even genuine epiphanies do not always lead to aspiration, but can be distorted into self-aggrandizing merits or stories, to serve more the person than the values recognized. Similarly, aspirations can fail, and require more than good will to bear morally commendable fruit: including empirical knowledge, practical skills and supporting social circumstances.

Decision to use psychedelics is ethically loaded, as psychedelic experiences can profoundly impact individuals' valuations, a core aspect of our personhood. Understanding of the psychedelic-induced value shifts is an important part of addressing ethical concerns around psychedelic therapy. As suggested, the potential for transformative changes underscores the importance of thorough informed consent procedures before engaging in psychedelic-assisted treatments.¹⁷⁹ As widely agreed, care should be directed towards the foundationally important context of psychedelic use. The account provided here underscores the significance of contextual factors, such as conceptual and cultural frameworks, supporting practices and prior aspirations, in shaping the outcomes of psychedelic experiences.¹⁸⁰ Notably, personal aspirations should be recognized as a central aspect of the priming of psychedelic experience as well as a factor of the integration phase of psychedelic use, prompting the need to expand therapeutic protocols to adequately support these processes.

These contextual factors can greatly enhance positive value changes but also pose risks of aspiring towards undesirable directions provided by one's environment or worldview. Even our most self-transcendent values are always interpreted through a worldview and practical understanding it provides and fulfilled through affordances

¹⁷⁹ Edward Jacobs, 'Transformative Experience and Informed Consent to Psychedelic-Assisted Psychotherapy', *Frontiers in Psychology* 14, (2023); Nicolas Langlitz et al., 'Moral Psychopharmacology Needs Moral Inquiry: The Case of Psychedelics', *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 12, (2021), 1104; Devenot et al., 2022; William R Smith and Dominic Sisti, 'Ethics and Ego Dissolution: The Case of Psilocybin', *Journal of Medical Ethics* 47, no. 12, (December 2021), 807–814.

¹⁸⁰ Devenot et al., 2022; Dupuis, 2022; Pace and Devenot, 2021; Ido Hartogsohn, 'Modalities of the Psychedelic Experience: Microclimates of Set and Setting in Hallucinogen Research and Culture', *Transcultural Psychiatry* 59, no. 5, (1 October 2022), 579–591.

available in the cultural milieu. Whether recycling or revolution or ecofascistic dictatorship is the recommended course of action after an epiphany of nature hinges on one's worldview. If one's worldview is normatively flawed or epistemically mistaken, aspiration even with good intentions may lead to ethically dubious outcomes, as seen in cases of right-wing psychedelia and cultic use.¹⁸¹ Instances of psychedelic use within cults like the Manson Family or Aum Shinrikyo illustrate how psychedelics can be manipulated to serve evil ambitions, often through individuals who genuinely believe they are aspiring towards good.¹⁸² Therefore, whether aspirations lead to normatively desirable outcomes depends on one's prior valuations, the environmental and cultural context, and moral luck, given the indeterminate nature of psychedelic experiences.¹⁸³ Individually, fostering successful and morally beneficial aspirations may require reflection, cultivation of epistemic virtues before psychedelic use, and social support and feedback.

The broader societal impact of increasing psychedelic use raises important questions about their potential effects on cultural values. The frameworks and cultural contexts surrounding psychedelics, along with prevailing beliefs and perceptions, are likely to influence the types of value changes and aspirations that are promoted. Psychedelic experiences, being arguably extreme contextually sensitive 'super-placebos', may be subject to feedback loops between societal conceptions about their effects and their actual effects.¹⁸⁴ While psychedelics have the potential to promote valuations such as prosociality, ecological awareness, and wisdom, their actual impact may depend on the prevailing practices, institutions and frameworks. It is crucial that the aspirational context not only exists but is also normatively desirable. Thus, those responsible for psychedelic apprenticeship – such as organizations and actors in psychedelic therapy, spirituality and culture – have an important role in actively shaping practices,

¹⁸¹ Pace and Devenot, 2021.

¹⁸² Callard (2018) argues that nobody can aspire towards moral evil, as genuine aspiration is by definition self-transcendent, i.e. towards genuine values in the world. I agree with this position, although, as the saying goes, the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

¹⁸³ There is also the possibility that psychedelic epiphanies can break through culturally sanctioned but corrupt or defended ways of seeing, and thus sometimes correct one's values (cf. Roseman & Karkabi 2021). However, this is likely a less probable outcome than reinforcement of one's already existing value system.

¹⁸⁴ Cf. Ian Hacking, 'The Looping Effects of Human Kinds', in *Causal Cognition: A Multidisciplinary Debate ; a Fyssen Foundation Symposium*, ed. Dan Sperber and Fondation Fyssen, 1. publ. paperback, reprint, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002); David Dupuis and Samuel Veissiere, 'Culture, Context, and Ethics in the Therapeutic Use of Hallucinogens: Psychedelics as Active Super-Placebos?', *Transcultural Psychiatry* 59, (19 October 2022), 136346152211314.

frameworks and institutions of psychedelic use to guide value changes towards ethically desirable directions, thereby mitigating potential societal harms and leveraging the constructive potential of psychedelic-induced value change.¹⁸⁵

Finally, how to evaluate the desirability of various courses of psychedelic-induced aspiration and value-change is a fundamental normative question, which depends on deeper normative considerations about which values and aspirations are normatively desirable. While most directions of aspiration promoted by psychedelics seem unproblematic, there is room for reasonable normative disagreement. For instance, opinions may differ on whether certain changes of political orientations raises alarm; or whether Harvard professors Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert made commendable decisions to forsake their academic careers in pursuit of psychedelic-influenced Eastern spirituality and countercultural utopias; or whether it would be justified and warranted to introduce psychedelics to non-clinical populations in order to combat climate change. Ethical and normative debates around psychedelic value change and aspiration are necessary and needed.

Future research

Above, I have integrated a wealth of empirical research and philosophical theory to shed light on the relation between epiphanic experiences and long-term value changes associated with psychedelic experiences. However, there are further philosophical/theoretical and empirical questions requiring addressing. One further avenue is to integrate the insights from the study of psychedelic experiences and other pivotal mental states to advance current psychological theories of value change.¹⁸⁶ Many psychological theories of value change lack insights into altered states. Psychedelic value changes are epiphanic to an exceptional degree compared to other forms of value change and should be interesting for general theories of value change, which so far have neglected epiphanies, perhaps because of monophasic cultural bias (i.e. neglect of non-ordinary states of consciousness).

For example, in the framework of Bardi & Goodwin neither epiphanies nor aspiration are articulated as mechanisms of value change.¹⁸⁷ Epiphanies match their

¹⁸⁵ Christopher Timmermann, Rosalind Watts, and David Dupuis, 'Towards Psychedelic Apprenticeship: Developing a Gentle Touch for the Mediation and Validation of Psychedelic-Induced Insights and Revelations', *Transcultural Psychiatry* 59, no. 5, (1 October 2022), 691–704.

¹⁸⁶ Bardi and Goodwin, 2011.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

framework as a conscious and rapid type of initial value change which can either convert primed values into experiential realities or challenge one's prior evaluative schemas - apparently in a deeply experiential and visceral manner. Epiphanies are neither automatic (i.e. sub-conscious) nor effortful (active thinking) routes to value change but represent a third modality of change of evaluative schemata change, in a manner that is immediately apprehended and impresses the mind sometimes with immense and sustained force. Aspiration could be seen as repeated effortful processing of value which can reinforce temporary changes into sustained schema- and value changes, and lead to an autotelic and self-reinforcing deepening of certain valuations. Psychologically speaking, aspiration seems to mediate some of the effects of epiphanies.

The theoretical ideas discussed in this chapter need further empirical corroboration, and present valuable hypotheses for a future empirical research program. Currently, much of the existing research on psychedelic value changes consists of small-scale studies rely on measures before and after experience, or cross-sectional comparisons, and neither conceptually nor empirically delineate effects of psychedelic experience from subsequent strivings inspired by the experience, or the role of cultural context in post-experience value changes. Questionnaires related to value-oriented life, aspiration, self-transcendence, and self-transcendent values already exist and could be utilized in such research endeavours, to empirically explore the trajectories of psychedelic-induced value change in various cultural settings.¹⁸⁸ Further research is needed on how value changes and other kinds of changes such as metaphysical beliefs or changes in self-concept intertwine. Finally, this article has relied on broad strokes and generalizations; however, the effects individual differences such as personality differences or trait self-transcendence have on likelihoods of both epiphanies and aspirations should be explored.

Conclusion

According to recent research, psychedelic experiences can both help to reconnect to one's core values, and cause value changes. I suggest that epiphanies and aspirations represent two intertwined phases of psychedelic value changes. Psychedelic experiences

¹⁸⁸ Tim Kasser, 'Sketches for a Self-Determination Theory of Values', in *Handbook of Self-Determination Research*, (Rochester, NY, US: University of Rochester Press, 2002): 123-140; Kitson et al., 2020; Shalom H. Schwartz, 'An Overview of the Schwartz Theory of Basic Values', *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture* 2, no. 1, (1 December 2012), 3-20.

can by inducing epiphanies temporarily expand or deepen one's grasp of values: open one's sensibilities, imagination and perception to various aspects of the world in a deeply engaged and value-laden manner. Psychedelic encounters with values can motivate users to aspire towards values encountered and live value-oriented life. Epiphanies can strengthen one's prior aspiration, although sometimes they can also change one's directions in radical ways. On the other hand, aspiration is a significant way of integrating epiphanic experiences, and often crucial for a sustained long-term value change to take place. The integration of epiphanies requires aspiration, as one often must do conscious long-term work to fully learn and stabilize novel values or sensibilities, or to maintain connection to one's core values. The concept of aspiration is central for making sense of the relation between psychedelic experiences and the diachronically extended processes of value changes occurring after the experience, in the wider context of a person's life and biography. Both processes are culturally embedded, and thus the direction of these aspirations as well as the content of epiphanies varies depending on the context of psychedelic use. These morally relevant phenomena suggest that psychedelics may have potential to serve as tools for value education and might be useful for fostering aspirations towards spiritual and artistic ideals, prosocial and environmental behaviour, and personal well-being. The key insights of this article might be important for understanding multiple modalities of psychedelic use, as aspiration unifies the contexts of therapy, wisdom and spirituality.

References¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁹ AI-tool (ChatGPT) was used to shorten and proofread sections of this chapter.