

“Psychedelics and Moral Psychology: The Case of Forgiveness”

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**Abstract:** Several authors have recently suggested that classic psychedelics might be safe and effective agents of moral enhancement. This raises the question: can we learn anything interesting about the nature of moral experience from a close examination of transformative psychedelic experiences? The interdisciplinary enterprise of *philosophical psychopathology* attempts to learn about the structure and function of the “ordinary” mind by studying the radically altered mind. By analogy, in this chapter we argue that we can gain knowledge about the everyday moral life by studying extraordinary experiences of altered moral cognition and experience. We focus on a specific class of cases: experiences of *forgiveness* induced by psychedelics. We argue that close attention to such experiences reveals the importance of thought/emotion coherence and dissonance in the moral life and vindicates some heterodox ideas about moral phenomenology and psychology.

**Keywords:** psychedelic, hallucinogen, ayahuasca, DMT, psilocybin, forgiveness, moral psychology, moral phenomenology, literature, self-compassion

*The appeal is to the intelligence but does not go via arguments - however hard that may be to fit into our philosophical schemes. – Cora Diamond*

*A really new emotion implies a modification of all other existing emotions and it requires a whole new world of intellect to accommodate it. – Lionel Trilling*

## **1. Introduction**

Recently, several authors have suggested that classic psychedelics might be safe and effective agents of moral enhancement. The idea of *psychedelic moral enhancement* takes its cue from first-person reports and quantitative findings suggesting that psychedelic experiences can promote prosocial attitudes and behaviours. If this is the case, then a further question arises: can we learn anything interesting about the nature of moral experience and the moral life from a close examination of these transformative experiences? The interdisciplinary enterprise of *philosophical psychopathology* is predicated on the idea that we can learn about the structure and function of the “ordinary” mind by studying the radically altered mind. By analogy, in this chapter we argue that we can gain knowledge about the nature and structure of the everyday moral life by studying extraordinary experiences of dramatically altered moral cognition and experience. We focus on a specific class of cases: experiences of *forgiveness* under the influence of psychedelic substances. Many users of psychedelics report experiencing profound epiphanies about important personal relationships, including “letting go” of old grievances and attaining illuminating new perspectives on others’ behaviour. We argue that close attention to such experiences reveals the importance of thought/emotion coherence and dissonance in the moral life, vindicates some heterodox ideas about moral phenomenology and psychology, and provides some interesting empirical confirmation of informal and experientially derived intuitions concerning the nature of morality.

## **2. Psychedelic Moral Enhancement**

In the past thirty years a new wave of research has re-examined the properties of classic psychedelic substances such as lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) and psilocybin, finding evidence that moderate-to-high doses can be given safely in controlled conditions. Several studies suggest that one to three psychedelic sessions can result in lasting psychological benefits, including reductions in psychiatric symptoms and positive personality change in healthy volunteers (Aday et al., 2020).

The last point, about personality change, connects with a speculative but undeniably intriguing proposal: that psychedelics, when used appropriately, might function as effective agents of *moral enhancement*. Psychedelics have long histories of ceremonial and religious use in various indigenous cultures, notably in the Americas (George et al., 2020). Extant religions that use psychedelics as sacraments invariably credit them with improving the moral and spiritual attitudes and conduct of individuals. Discussing the shamanic use of the Amazonian beverage *ayahuasca*, Michael Winkelman says: “Ayahuasca is often seen as opening the heart, expanding love for others, and leading to healing of both self and relationships. Ingesting the brew is seen as expanding awareness, healing the personality, and providing the insight and energies to restore personal relations” (2015, p. 108).

Since the explosion of psychedelic research in the 1950s and 60s, the Western world, too, has furnished plentiful anecdotal reports of lives and personalities being transformed in morally

salutary ways by a single psychedelic experience. One cancer patient who received the classic psychedelic dipropyltryptamine (DPT) in a therapeutic context in the 1970s reported:

The results of the use of the hallucinogenic drug on my life have been very profound... I have a much greater and deeper understanding of other people . . . and a much greater capacity to try to fulfil other people's needs... Overall I think that I am a much more content individual, having had the great opportunity to just glimpse for a very short moment the overall thinking of God, of possibly being brought into his confidence for just a brief period, to be reassured that there is a very beautiful, loving masterful plan in this Universe for all of us.

(Richards, 1978, p. 124).

Similarly, reflecting on her first LSD experience, the psychologist Frances Vaughan comments:

Although many of the insights that flooded my awareness were forgotten, many remained to influence my life... I... gained a new appreciation for the Christian teaching of forgiveness. I saw how our own condemnation injures us, and how our difficulty in forgiving ourselves for imagined imperfections contributes to neurotic guilt and anxiety. Not only did I feel forgiven for being just as I was, I saw that in reality there was nothing to forgive. This seemed to remove the obstacles to the experience of love and I felt an extension of love and forgiveness to all beings everywhere... My appreciation of life itself and of the simple tasks of everyday living was also profoundly enhanced. I found myself more open in my intimate relationships, and better able to give and receive love without fear. I also became aware of a desire to be of service in the world, to make some contribution to humanity through my work.

(Vaughan, 1983).

As well as traditional wisdom and anecdotal reports, an emerging body of quantitative research hints at morally beneficial effects of psychedelic administration. In various studies, healthy volunteers who received psychedelics reported increases in: altruistic and prosocial attitudes and behaviours (lasting up to 14 months; Griffiths et al., 2008, 2011); empathic functioning (Blatchford et al., 2021); personality traits which may have links to morality, such as Openness to Experience (MacLean et al., 2011) and Self-Transcendence (Bouso et al., 2015); and mindfulness-related capacities, which are linked to the cultivation of ethical behaviour in traditional Buddhist practice (Letheby, 2022). Psychedelic use has also been well-documented to lead to: increased feelings of connectedness, including to other people and to the natural environment (Carhart-Harris et al., 2018), higher levels of nature-relatedness (Nour et al., 2017; Lyons & Carhart-Harris, 2018; Kettner et al., 2019), and increased pro-environmental behaviors (Forstmann & Sagioglou, 2017). Finally, one study found a correlation between psychedelic use and decreased narcissistic tendencies (van Mulukom et al., 2020).

This suggestive body of evidence intersects with an ongoing debate about the possibility and desirability of moral bioenhancement. Philosophers and other scholars have been aware for some time of the possible advent of biotechnological interventions that could improve or enhance humans' moral capacities. This awareness has occasioned lively discussion about whether moral enhancement by biotechnological means might be feasible, how it might work if so, and whether

– and under what circumstances – its use would be ethically justifiable. In recent years, several authors have cited controlled psychedelic use as a potentially safe and effective real-world moral enhancement technique (e.g., Tennison, 2012; Ahlskog, 2018; Ballesteros, 2019). Earp (2018) contends that the possibility of psychedelic moral enhancement has great significance for the moral enhancement debate, arguing that the debate has been stuck in a dilemma: all potential enhancement techniques being discussed are either (a) too unrealistic and farfetched or (b) too similar to familiar forms of moral education, and hence do not raise the distinctive conceptual, ethical, and socio-cultural issues raised by the prospect of genuinely *biotechnological* pro-moral interventions. For Earp, psychedelic moral enhancement sails between the Scylla and the Charybdis of these two options: it is a real-world, potentially feasible form of moral enhancement that nonetheless constitutes a radical departure from familiar forms of moral education.

Supposing that psychedelic moral enhancement does, in fact, work, *how* does it work? What is the relation between the powerfully meaningful experiences that psychedelic users undergo, and the attitudinal and behavioural changes that putatively follow?

In this chapter we offer a contribution to this nascent area of inquiry (cf. Ahlskog, 2017; Kähönen, 2023) by focusing on the phenomenology of experiences of *forgiveness* induced by psychedelics. Closer attention to the moral phenomenology of psychedelic experiences can generate new hypotheses about potential mechanisms of psychedelic moral enhancement; as such, we aim here to contribute to the philosophy of psychedelics and to interdisciplinary psychedelic research. But the pay-off of this exercise is not limited to our understanding of psychedelics, for the fields of moral psychology and moral phenomenology can profit, too, from a closer examination of morally transformative experiences enabled by psychedelics. From a detailed interrogation of psychedelic forgiveness experiences, we hope to extract lessons about (a) the nature of forgiveness itself and (b) the relations between reason and emotion in the moral life. First-person reports suggest psychedelics might morally enhance the relevant agents by (*inter alia*) reducing the dissonance they experience between beliefs and emotions (cf. Albahari, 2014). This suggests, in turn, that such dissonance and its overcoming is central to the moral life, and that we might profit from understanding how it can be achieved.

In particular, we will argue, on the basis of our phenomenological explorations, that psychedelic phenomenology (i) illustrates the far-reaching importance in moral experience of coherence vs. tension between beliefs and emotions, and (ii) vindicates some heterodox ideas about the nature of the moral life: notably, that *rational* processes of moral change are not limited to changes to moral beliefs on the basis of argument and reason, but instead centrally involve the exercise of an emotionally inflected moral imagination (Diamond, 1982). The moral life is the life of reason and the holding of the ‘right’ moral beliefs, as Kant might suggest, but it is also the domain of felt emotional responses and imaginative perception. One's moral position can be changed rationally, not only by acknowledging the force of arguments, but at least as often by being given “paradigms of a sort of attention” that show one the “possibility and attractiveness” of certain *ways of seeing* morally important situations (Diamond, 1982, pp. 32-4). A salutary domain of moral psychology that may illustrate these notions is forgiveness.

### 3. Two Kinds of Forgiveness

‘Forgiveness’ is a prominent preoccupation in contemporary moral psychology. A quick search of journal articles, books, book chapters, edited collections, conference proceedings, and invited talks throws up many titles and topics; philosophers are working on a topic of great interest in the personal and moral domains. Forgiveness, healing, regret, guilt, anger—this cluster of concerns animates many. We often bear grudges, carry around the anger of unresolved disputes, regret our many moral errors and omissions, and seek to introduce healing into our conflicted relationships. Forgiveness plays a crucial role in addressing these personal zones of conflict and contestation. Forgiveness is a difficult business, perhaps among the most perplexing of all in human relationships. We cannot build structures of family and friendship without dealing with its challenges. Some of these challenges can be understood in terms of a distinction between *two kinds* of forgiveness.

Forgiving appears to involve two modalities or two kinds, termed “rational/cognitive” and “emotional” (Caouette, 2012). The existence of this distinction raises the possibility that to forgive fully or completely might require both rational and emotional forgiving. (Your friend launches into an abusive tirade accusing you of cheating him; shocked and angered, you respond with abuse of your own. Your friend apologizes, making note of a misunderstanding and work-related stress; you accept his apology and decide to move on. However, a week later, an outburst of anger on your part shows both of you that you have not *emotionally* forgiven him.) Tentatively then, we cognitively forgive by understanding (fitting into the space of reasons) the act of wrongdoing – for instance, we may eliminate resentment by revising our rational judgments that support such feelings (Hieronymi, 2001). But emotional forgiveness appears to be more difficult, much harder to come by, for agents must “overcome” (Murphy, 2003, p. 16; Holmgren, 1993, p. 341), “abandon” (Richards, 1988, p.184), or “withdraw” (Darwall, 2006, p.72) a cluster of corrosive emotions such as “hostile retributive feelings” (Garrard & McNaughton 2002, p. 44), anger, hatred, contempt, resentment, and sadness; if these feelings toward the wrongdoer persist, then emotional (and perhaps full) forgiveness may not have taken place.

Interestingly, emotional forgiveness seems to require an effort on the part of the moral agent that is not well understood. For instance, overcoming anger and resentment may involve a ‘forgetting’ (Blustein, 2014) (a process we do not understand), or ‘moving on’ without the burden of resentment (Adams, 1991; Holmgren, 1993) or “giving up” or “repudiating” it (Murphy & Hampton, 1988, p.83). Another claim is that “forgiveness from the heart” involves “letting go of one’s own point of view”<sup>1</sup> and “many changes in feelings, attitudes, and judgments” (Adams, 1991, p.294). Or it requires “reapproval” by consciously deciding to *see* the “wrongdoer in a new, more favourable light” (Murphy & Hampton, 1988, p.84). Notably, moral agents’ efforts to forgive emotionally in these kinds of ways do not always succeed. Moral emotions seem, sometimes, to exhibit cognitive impenetrability. We may then attain a rational understanding of the wrongdoer’s actions and words, and yet still carry anger or disappointment. Perhaps we may rationally forgive but still be emotionally hurt and, as such, not fully forgive. We may then forgive in one sense and not the other; to forgive fully may require forgiveness in both forms.

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<sup>1</sup> An idea that is especially relevant to psychedelic-facilitated forgiveness experiences, as we will see.

The distinction we make note of above can be explicated further by examining the difference between the notions of *understanding a wrongdoing* and *rationaly forgiving a wrongdoing*. To forgive rationally is to accept that a wrongdoing has been made intelligible or comprehensible to us: we understand the reasons that led someone to commit a morally problematic act and accept their apology; this is rational forgiveness. Our offender's behaviour no longer seems malevolent, evil, or perniciously directed against us; rather, it appears far more benign to us now. We can rationally comprehend this, but the aftermath of the initial emotional hurt lingers. We suggest that rational forgiving may be achieved when we can understand (interpret as rational) the offending act. The mere fact that we find the offenders' means-ends reasoning transparent does not mean we emotionally accept our offenders' actions being directed at us and causing us emotional harm.

If forgiveness requires something over and above this fitting a wrongdoing into the space of reasons, what is it? If we understand the reasons that lead someone to commit a morally reprehensible act and yet do not judge them worthy of forgiveness, then what is missing? We suggest: the right kind of emotions' being in place, a kind of emotional reconciliation needed for emotional forgiving to supplement the rational forgiving (or understanding) already in place.

The cases we are considering above, though, lie in the space of personal relationships; they are distinctive in that fitting the action into the space of reasons shows us that the agent deserves forgiveness. However, there are more impersonal cases in which reprehensible actions and agents do not seem to us to deserve forgiveness; here, when we fit the relevant actions into the space of reasons, we see that the moral agent does not deserve forgiveness. For instance, we can comprehend intellectually the reasons that led an avowed Nazi to participate in the moral atrocities of the Holocaust; that is, we understand that they held certain reprehensible beliefs and used the Holocaust to realize political ends arising from those beliefs. Still, we do not consider them worthy of forgiveness. Here, intellectually understanding why an agent behaved as they did, that is, fitting their behaviour into the space of reasons does not entail judging that they ought to be forgiven. We might say, then, that rational forgiveness (of the kind that would lead us to accept an apology) implies some understanding of the offender's reasons, but not vice versa. Intellectual understanding is necessary but not sufficient, even for rational forgiveness. In some cases, we may understand why an offender acted the way they did but not judge that they deserve forgiveness or be willing to accept an apology; we may understand, but not (in any sense) forgive.<sup>2</sup> Here, however, we focus on cases in which intellectual understanding *does* lead to a judgement that forgiveness is warranted but may not cause a corresponding emotional shift.

If 'true forgiving' plausibly involves both intellectual and emotional components, then this suggests another interesting possibility: *perhaps even rational or cognitive forgiveness, in the absence of emotional forgiveness, cannot be complete*. To fully understand and make comprehensible the rationale behind an insult – physical or otherwise – directed at oneself may involve an emotional experience, too; the phenomenology of "true" or "full" forgiveness may involve, necessarily, the "lifting" of an emotional burden consequent on a newfound perception or comprehension of morally and emotionally relevant facts. If the agent is still carrying the anger and disappointment of the injury around as a piece of "emotional baggage", then she might not have fully attained the supposed rational understanding either, despite comprehending certain facts on an intellectual or propositional level. The fitting of the wrongdoer's actions into the cognitive

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<sup>2</sup> We are indebted to Virginia Ballesteros for this point.

space of reasons required to make them comprehensible, less malevolent, *may only proceed if facilitated by the right emotional scaffolding*. The space of reasons may then not be purely cognitive insofar as it possesses emotional components too. When we tell the wrongdoer that “we understand,” that “it’s OK,” we may not merely be signalling a cognitive response: we may be indicating *we have felt emotional relief too* and that we are now, *unburdened*, ready to move on.

Conversely, there may be situations in which the agent in question rationally understands the putative wrongdoer’s actions but does not find themselves able to forgive unless they have experienced the relevant emotions too. There are then, two claims above: first, for there to be true forgiveness there must be rational and emotional forgiveness both. “True” or “complete” forgiveness involves both kinds. Second, an analysis of the phenomenology of these components suggests that it may be the case that *even* what we are terming (mere) rational forgiveness is not attainable by reason alone, and emotions must play a significant role in achieving it.

Forgiveness, like other moral phenomena, has rational and emotional components; we have suggested that a full forgiving may require both. If that is the case, then forgiveness requires both a change in emotion and a change in cognitive attitude towards the wrongdoer and is accomplished only when one successfully goes through both stages; one form of forgiving cannot be prioritized over the other. The separation of the two may only be useful for analytical purposes and should not lead us to imagine that it is present in the moral subject.

Our discussion above shows that there may be as many as three conditions for full forgiveness as we define it. First, we understand, intellectually, why the person acted as they did. Second, we need to judge, intellectually – perhaps based on an emotionally inflected understanding – that they deserve to be forgiven. Third, we need to go beyond intellectual judgements and “let go” of our feelings of resentment. This discussion of these kinds of forgiveness shows that while moral psychology has done justice to moral phenomena by including psychological considerations, it could profit from being more informed by moral phenomenology. *What does it feel like to forgive?* Might we know that we have not forgiven by introspecting our moods and emotions, the ones that remain even after we have supposedly rationally forgiven? Might forgiveness have a ‘pleasant’ phenomenology? The appeal of particular phenomenal states might explain why some moral stances are desirable: It feels good to do good. This suggests that close attention to moral phenomenology can teach us about causal and functional aspects of moral psychology, because the phenomenal properties of moral states are not separate from what they (make us) do. The distinction between these two types of forgiveness remains analytically useful even if emotions are necessary to fully forgive; it allows us to make note of the importance of phenomenological considerations in moral behaviour and in supplementing analyses founded in moral psychology. Drawing apart these two kinds enables such analysis and clarifies what may currently be incomplete or underappreciated in the moral psychology of forgiveness.

This intertwining of the rational and the emotional in forgiveness is suggestive of a broader thesis about the interplay between the cognitive and affective, the rational and emotional, in the domain of moral psychology. Far afield, we may read the Buddha as suggesting that enlightenment or awakening involves a marriage of the rational with the emotional in our thoughts and actions; for instance, our knowledge of the thesis of no-self or our knowledge of ‘universal transitoriness’ should temper our emotional responses to our aging, decay, and eventual death. Our intellectual

realization of this thesis is crucial to our attaining a particular emotional state. Full rational understanding requires emotional understanding too; an emotional understanding requires a rational one. The Buddha was asking us to feel and emote differently, by way of coming to certain sorts of realizations or apprehensions. We are suggesting that fully attaining certain sorts of realizations or apprehensions necessarily involves a complex and inextricable interplay between perceptive, imaginative, and affective elements. As Cora Diamond has noted, moral claims are not exclusively arguments; and yet they make claim upon our acting based on reasons.

An unquestioned separation of “reason” and “emotion” generates dissonance in moral agents, visible when we invoke moral reasoning as a post-facto guarantor of cognitive respectability for our emotionally inflected moral decisions, or when we are reluctant to admit that “irrational emotions” underwrite our “rationally deliberated” moral decisions. Emotions have an intellectual, rational, or cognitive component; for example, recent predictive processing accounts hold that the nature of emotional experience “depends both on the interoception of brute bodily signals and [on] higher-level ‘cognitive appraisals’” (Wilkinson et al., 2019, p. 104). Though we perceive and sense emotions, we can not only state reasons for why we experience certain emotions, but moreover, our interpretation and understanding of them are components of the emotions we experience; we recognize and individuate emotions based on our associated beliefs, changing which could and should change the associated emotions.<sup>3</sup> To deny either our affective or rational selves or their interaction with each other is to fail to do justice to the moral psychology of human agents.

On the other hand, it is sometimes claimed that emotions are not susceptible to reasons, that we cannot reason our way to the attainment or experience of certain emotions, and nor can we modulate, attenuate, or eliminate emotions by reasoning. Gowans (2010, p.30) invokes Williams (1994) to note that “emotions are so deeply and securely rooted in a non-rational or irrational part of us that...they...are neither voluntary nor responsive to reason.” This discordance between the spoken word and the experienced feeling, between cognition and affect, between emotion and reason, has been noticed by Nietzsche (1979, p. 82), who famously wrote, “We have already grown beyond whatever we have words for.” Incomplete forgiveness may then be an exemplary case of the dissonance between beliefs and emotions in moral agents; some kinds of desirable moral behaviour or stances are only possible when this dissonance is diminished. Our forgiveness may be dead on arrival if it does not address that which is left unsaid in our hearts.

#### 4. Diamond’s Moral Philosophy

What can the psychedelic experience tell us about this relationship between the rational and emotional and its relevance to the phenomena of forgiveness? With respect to the claim that emotions are impervious to reason, something seems right, and something seems wrong, when we consider moral phenomena like forgiveness. Can psychedelic experience reports help us resolve this puzzle, telling us what is right and what is wrong? To foreshadow, we think these experiences illustrate that emotions *are* responsive to reasons, but not reasons understood narrowly; rather, emotions respond to our *seeing* things differently, in a way that psychedelics can make possible.

We take our lead here from some compelling ideas about moral phenomenology developed in the work of Cora Diamond. Diamond’s concern in her paper ‘Anything but Argument’ is to develop

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<sup>3</sup> As a referee notes, emotions and their associated beliefs are implicated too in our “social and linguistic practices”; such implication permits emotions to be “identified and individuated.”



a conception of morality and moral thought which can do justice to the distinctive moral force of great literature, and which eschews the following simplistic dichotomy: all moral persuasion either amounts, implicitly or explicitly, to argument, or is non-rational, *merely* emotive persuasion. Analysing the moral force of certain passages from authors such as Charles Dickens and Henry James, Diamond (1982, pp. 32-34) argues that literature can appeal to the intelligence and imagination in providing “paradigms of a sort of [morally significant] attention,” and demonstrating the “possibility and attractiveness” of certain ways of conceiving of, and responding to, the world—without providing anything that could be reduced without remainder to premises and conclusions.

Diamond’s paper is, among other things, a critique of Onora O’Neill’s review of Stephen Clark’s book *The Moral Status of Animals*. For Diamond, O’Neill’s review embodies the misconceptions and false dichotomies about the nature of morality that she wishes to correct. O’Neill charges that Clark’s positive vision of the moral status of animals “appeals only to the heart”, failing to “reach beyond assertion to argument” (1980, p. 445). In response, Diamond comments:

[When] a philosopher aims to convince, as Clark does, and uses a style which - as he himself recognises - will not succeed with those whose hearts cannot be moved at all by the vision he suggests, he is told he ought to use a method which is as it were heart-indifferent. But it is not at all obvious that the method is appropriate. I believe that underlying the idea that one ought to use such an approach is the idea that when someone is reasonably convinced of something, the convincing will have to have proceeded by arguments (or what could, at any rate, be set out as arguments), and the capacities of his head and not of his heart will be all that is involved. Part of this idea is that becoming convinced in any other way is merely a matter of the operation of causes. Alterations in someone’s heart are carried out not by reasonable convincings but by – mere – persuadings...

Is there nothing that is an attempt to enlarge the moral imagination?... Some hearts are not ‘already inclined’ some ways because their possessors have not exercised their imaginations in certain directions, have not been led to do so... [O’Neill] writes as if the heart as it were simply went whatever way it did, and that serious thought, directed at those whose hearts go initially in some direction which one thinks is the wrong direction, aims for the head and not the heart of its intended audience. But this *must* be a mistake. Dickens aims at the heart, and there is serious thought in what he does; he aims to convince and not simply to bring it about that the heart goes from bad state 1 to good state 2. He does not aim at *mere* conversion, if I may put it so.

(Diamond, 1982, pp. 25-27).

As Diamond notes above, moral arguments, or attempts to convince us of the rightness of a moral stance or position, do not, and should not, merely “aim at the head”; they must engage with the heart too. They cannot be mere chains of reasoning but must involve the construction of a vision of a moral world which we can accept emotionally. They must engage the moral imagination in a way that persuades us, emotionally, of the rightness of a moral claim, one which we would do well to internalize. Moral discourse then, does not consist merely of airtight, closely reasoned

arguments but of emotional appeals to our moral imagination, persuading us to perceive the moral world, and our place within it, in a particular way.

The psychedelic experience and the moral philosophy of Cora Diamond may seem like odd bedfellows. However, we think Diamond’s remarks here characterize the morally transformative force of certain altered states of consciousness just as aptly as they characterize the force of passages from *David Copperfield*. Ayahuasca and other psychedelics, we will contend, can enlarge the moral imagination, exercise it in certain directions, and thereby incline users’ hearts in new ways. Psychedelic experiences can convince, morally, emotionally, and relationally, in ways that involve both serious thought – or, in any case, deep and perceptive *understanding* – and the intertwined exercise of capacities of head and heart.

### **5. Emotional Forgiveness in the Psychedelic Experience**

An oft-reported feature of psychedelic experiences, especially in structured (therapeutic or ceremonial) settings, is some combination of the following cluster of emotions: overwhelming feelings of gratitude directed at friends, family, and acquaintances; a feeling of global, or universal connectedness to all living beings; feelings of love and affection; a feeling of commonality, sympathy, and empathy with all human beings; and an enhanced capacity to view other human beings in a more compassionate and forgiving light. These emotional reactions evoke parallels with the sense of “common humanity” that is one of the three factors of the Buddhist-derived psychological construct of *self-compassion* introduced by Kristin Neff (2003).

Some of the appeal of the psychedelic experience, and perhaps some of its therapeutic benefits, can be traced to the generation of these “positive emotions” (Hoffman, 2022). Users may be seeking a method that allows them to experience emotions that they have little opportunity to experience in their sober waking lives. They may be aware they entertain corrosive emotions, often resistant to reasoned discourse or conventional psychotherapeutic interventions, that are damaging to their relationships, and seek out these experiences as a way of resolving such emotions. Psychedelic users sometimes ‘set the intention’ before commencing a session; very often, these intentions include working on conflicted relationships. And, indeed, users often report being able to ‘work on’ the problems arising in important and challenging relationships in their life. Both “emotional breakthroughs” and “psychological insights”, often concerning important personal relationships, have been correlated with therapeutic effects of psychedelics (Roseman et al., 2019; Davis et al., 2020).

The phenomenology of psychedelic-induced forgiveness experiences suggests an attractive resolution of the tension we noted in the preceding section. The newfound feelings of forgiveness that people experience under psychedelics are not capricious and arbitrary: they do not result from a *mere* pharmacological modulation of emotional processes. But nor do they result, primarily, from processes of “reasoning” in a narrow, discursive sense. Rather, they result from users coming to *see things differently*: to inhabit vividly and imaginatively, and appreciate the details and texture of, a phenomenal world in which various people have characteristics that warrant forgiveness; such a phenomenal world highlights or amplifies aspects of the actual world to which the user had previously been insufficiently sensitive. 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. In sum, when there is a morally significant dissonance between belief and emotion, psychedelics can help relieve such dissonance by allowing people to *see (and feel) the world* as they previously merely *believed* or *judged* it to be.<sup>4</sup>

In a qualitative interview study of patients who received psilocybin-assisted therapy for existential distress relating to terminal illness, Belser et al. found that:

Through the process of coming to see their loved ones in a new way and with deeper clarity, four participants were able to transform feelings of frustration, anger, and disappointment toward important people in their lives into acceptance and forgiveness. One participant described coming to “an acceptance of the human experience.” This acceptance allowed her to release long-held resentments about past actions committed by her family and others. She said, I felt like my family was doing their best and that people tried as hard as they could. And that even people that weren’t there for me did their best, and certain things from the past were in the past. [pause] And that was okay.

Another participant talked about the shortcomings of her parents. She described reaching a place of acceptance of and forgiveness for her parents’ mistakes, to which she had felt “like a total stranger.” After her psilocybin session, she said, I felt like I let go of a lot of anger and resentment towards my parents. *I mean, I thought I had already done that, but I really hadn’t, and I kind of saw them more as, like, these flawed human beings who did the best they could.* A third participant described how during the psilocybin session, she was able to forgive her husband who, while she was sick with cancer, had pursued a secret affair with another woman. This participant suggested that *by coming to a deeper understanding*, she was able to stop “carrying this anger” and “open up more” to “feeling closeness and love” not only toward him but also herself. “I allowed myself to just not carry that weight of everything, and to forgive... And to forgive myself,” she said. (Belser et al., 2017, pp. 363-364; our emphasis).

In each of these cases, the same dynamic is at play: *through coming to see others differently*, the patient’s emotions towards those others change. Through a vivid perception, grasping, or understanding of others’ limitations and intentions, feelings of resentment or anger give way to feelings of forgiveness. Often, this newfound perception seems to result from a disruption to our default, self-centred patterns of attention, allowing attention to alight on aspects of the other that we previously had ignored or not appreciated fully. In the sober, pre-psychedelic state the allocation of salience and attention is guided egocentrically, leading us to see others in such guises as *one who wronged me*. Psychedelic ingestion disrupts the brain’s self-modelling systems that allocate salience and attention based on representations of the organism’s goals and interests (Letheby & Gerrans, 2017); this disruption allows us to see others in different guises, such as *suffering, well-meaning fellow human*, when different characteristics move to the foreground of experience. Particularly noteworthy is the second participant’s comment that she “thought [she] had already [let go of a lot of anger and resentment towards her parents], but [she] really hadn’t”:

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, this is not all they can do: in some cases, they allow people to see (and feel) the world in radically new ways, leading often to the formation of new beliefs and judgements. We thank Virginia Ballesteros for emphasising this point.

this illustrates the kind of dissonance between belief and emotion that psychedelic experiences seem often able to resolve.

One of us (SC) has had personal experiences on ayahuasca that significantly inform these claims, and indeed, served as a motivating idea for our central thesis. Here is SC's account of these experiences as they bear on our claims in this chapter:

*In May 2018, I attended an ayahuasca ceremony conducted in a Brooklyn warehouse by an American shaman. During my trip, my most dominant experience was one of wanting to 'heal' disputes with my family: my wife, my brother, my mother-in-law. These disputes had generated anger, resentment, bitterness and required considerable communication and negotiation. But during the trip, as I revisited those disputes, I found a vision awaiting of me of my connection and commonality with these individuals; I saw them as human beings like me, struggling to make sense of the lives they were living, needy for love and affection just like me, and therefore deserving of it. I felt that forgiveness was possible because of the affect I experienced when I thought about these relationships and the conflicts they enclosed; I felt my anger 'dissolve' even when I revisited the disputes I had had with them. My overwhelming desire, as the trip ended, was to rush home to my family and to hold them close. In the days that followed, I sought out friends and gave them hugs, thanking them for all they had brought to my life. My feelings had not gone away once the trip had ended; they had endured. The change they had induced was not transient; even though my relationships continue to demand work, they are not as affectively problematic as they were before.*

SC's experiences of forgiveness under the influence of ayahuasca do not seem to be idiosyncratic. As noted earlier, Winkelman holds that ayahuasca is often seen as "leading to healing of both self and relationships [and] providing the insight and energies to restore personal relations" (2015, p. 108; our emphasis). Moreover, ayahuasca-induced experiences of forgiveness are discussed at length in a blog post on *Chacruna*, with explicit reference to the distinction between what we have called rational and emotional forms of forgiveness (Lafrance, 2016).

As Letheby (2021) claims, the psychedelic experience can facilitate *new knowledge of old facts*: what previously was known merely intellectually and rationally can become a vivid affective, perceptual, and somatic reality under the influence. These psychedelic experiences, both personal and reported, lend credence to such claims. In a similar but non-psychedelic vein, James Baillie (2013, 2020) argues we may come to have shocking, clarifying, enlightening experiences of knowledge we already have, taking as an example an acute realization of the nothingness death entails even as we claim knowledge of the factual particulars of dying. Baillie for instance, describes his experience of "existential shock" (2020, p. 2585) as follows: "I no longer just knew this theoretically, but knew it in my bones" (2013, p. S189). Psychedelics, likewise, can provide emotional or moral knowledge we can feel in our bones, or hearts, or any other part of the somatic-affective complex we call the self. In particular, the psychedelic experience can provide new knowledge of morally relevant facts about others, such as the limitations imposed by their circumstances, the basic goodness of their intentions, or their various commonalities with us, including being subject to fundamental human predicaments in which we all share. Such rational-emotive realizations may underwrite the overcoming, forgetting, and shifting of emotions we are suggesting is required for full forgiving.

How exactly does this work? How can we understand the nature and causes of altered moral perception under psychedelics? One clue comes from the common idea that psychedelics can enhance moral capacities by *unselfing* (Murdoch, 1970): disrupting the neurocognitive systems involved in self-representation, thereby temporarily attenuating the phenomenal self and its influence on our experience of the world (Kähönen, 2023; Millière et al., 2018; Letheby, 2021). In our ordinary, sober state of consciousness, we often experience people and things primarily in terms of their effects on our prospects and interests: harm or help, friend or foe? The sense of self functions as a “centre of representational gravity”: attention and salience are allocated, and aspects of the world modelled, based on the goals and interests attributed to the self (Letheby & Gerrans, 2017). If a loved one is being represented in terms of their costs and benefits to us, we may *see them*, primarily, as “one who has hurt me”. This is a general and familiar phenomenon: we apprehend people, particulars, and situations under a description, extracting signal from noise, foregrounding some attributes at the expense of others, and seeing the relevant entity primarily as an instance of some category.

To apprehend, perceptually and emotively, the properties of others that might lead us to forgive them and release grudges and grievances, we need to stop seeing them as *one who hurt me*, and this can happen most readily and completely by letting go of the “me” whom they are perceived as having hurt. In episodes of psychedelic-induced unselfing, aspects of the world – including our loved ones – are no longer experienced in terms of their effects on the self’s goals and interests. Instead, they can be apprehended in a more open, receptive, spacious attention, which allows us to see them in new guises, as different constellations of properties come to the foreground: *vulnerable, suffering, well-intentioned fellow human who is doing her best under difficult circumstances*. So, while the shift is attentional, it is not primarily of perceptual attention in a low-level sense; rather, the shift is in patterns of social attention, emotion, and salience attribution, resulting from an altered affective orientation to the world<sup>5</sup>.

These considerations suggest that attention to moral phenomenology – especially of the extraordinary kinds made available through psychedelics – can inform moral psychology and overcome the limitations of philosophical abstraction when dealing with important issues of real human life. Our hope here is to help remedy this failure of conventional theorizing by offering a contribution to moral phenomenology, which can enrich moral psychology and neighbouring areas of philosophy.

Several questions remain about the account we have developed. At least one of these deserves brief discussion before we conclude. We have insisted, in a Diamondian spirit, that changes between ways of seeing (changes facilitated by psychedelics) can be genuinely rational, even though they do not consist in accepting conclusions based on arguments. However, it is not clear how transitions between ways of seeing the world can be rational – i.e., based on reasons – on the assumption that *the reasons that exist for us are determined by how we see the world*. The point – for which we are indebted to Virginia Ballesteros – is broadly Kuhnian: if our ways of seeing the world determine what counts as a reason, then there cannot be reasons for switching from one way of seeing to another, that somehow transcend both.

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<sup>5</sup> We thank Philip Gerrans for noting the importance of this distinction.

These issues are deep, and we cannot resolve them fully here. One possible response would be simply to deny the assumption – to hold that reasons exist independently of our ways of seeing, and our ways of seeing are simply ways that we *learn* about them. However, the beginnings of a different sort of resolution may be found in the idea that we do not simply have one way of seeing at any given time. Ways of seeing, whatever else they may be, are complex, nested, and hierarchically structured; multiple ways of seeing a particular situation can be consistent with a single way of seeing more abstract matters, such that the latter can provide neutral standards of arbitration. To make matters more concrete, consider the kind of case we have been examining: *A* is nursing a grievance and seeing *B* as *someone who wronged me*. Certain real features of *B* (being one who wronged me) are made salient by *A*'s operative self-centred attentional paradigm, while other real features of *B* (being a struggling, suffering human who is generally well-intentioned and doing the best she can in the face of difficulties) do not come to the fore. Then, during a psychedelic experience, *A*'s default, self-centred attentional paradigm is disrupted; previously ignored aspects of *B* become newly salient. *A* begins to see *B* as *a suffering fellow human doing her best in the face of difficulties* and consequently comes to forgive *B*. Is there any sense in which we can say, truly, that the transition *A* has undergone from one way of seeing to another was a rational one?

It seems to us that the answer is “yes”. There are good *reasons* to go from *A*'s former way of seeing *B* to her new one – epistemic reasons, *inter alia*. By seeing *B* in a new light, *A* has come to grasp (or perhaps to understand; Fink, 2022) facts about *B* that she previously had failed to grasp, or to understand so deeply; she has become sensitive to, and come to appreciate, morally important aspects of *B* and of their relationship.

Now, perhaps the evaluative verdict we just gave is rooted in a specific way of seeing the world: a way of seeing that takes increases in understanding or enlargements of moral imagination as valuable and reason-giving. But clearly this is a way of seeing that is quite abstract, general, and independent of any specific *way in which A might see B*. When ways of seeing are local and confined to specific people, topics, or situations, it seems to us that there is no obstacle to saying that transitions between ways of seeing can be rational, even if our capacity to recognise the relevant reasons depends on specific ways of seeing more abstract matters.

## 6. Conclusion

We have argued here that the reason/emotion dissonance often experienced by moral agents, that may prevent full forgiveness in some cases, can be resolved by moral agents coming to see things differently (cf. “paradigms of a sort of attention”) – a change that is not *merely* emotive, but also not narrowly discursive. And it is the seeing – and grasping vividly, in detail – that *P* that leads one to emote as though *P*, whereas merely believing that *P* didn't touch one's emotions. We have argued that psychedelics can facilitate such *seeing things differently* and can thereby facilitate full forgiveness with both rational and emotional components. Such a notion importantly augments theorizing in moral psychology with considerations drawn from moral phenomenology, an enrichment which we have argued helps us understand the complexities of moral experiences and reasoning. Moral phenomena are both cognitive and emotional; a sufficiently rich moral psychology must address both components and recognize their intertwined nature.

The contribution we make here to the philosophy of psychedelics and to interdisciplinary psychedelic research suggests fruitful new lines of inquiry. At the least it suggests new directions

for therapeutic intervention that deploys psychedelic substances. A salutary example is couples' counselling. Most long-term relationships between humans build up what we will tentatively term a 'residue of resentment.' This term reflects a series of disputes and conflicts that have been supposedly resolved by discussion, conversation, and resolution, but in fact have only been rationally resolved. That is, the participants have come to sort of agreement about how to move on and 'leave the past behind' – except that they have not. This residue of resentment festers and simmers and curdles and is exposed when other conflicts erupt. Partners find out, dismayingly enough, that an issue they had received apologies for and expressed understanding of, is raked up again and again, corrosively. Forgiveness has been offered rationally but not emotionally. And indeed, the one forgiven might not even feel forgiven and carry around unresolved feelings of guilt and resentment.

Wininger (2020) has reported, based on his clinical and personal experiences, that couples' therapy using the empathogen 3,4-Methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA) – which shares important properties with psychedelics – can enable couples to come to a richer, deeper understanding of themselves and to work on long-standing issues. Perhaps therapeutically guided couples' sessions deploying psilocybin administered to partners (or to other persons in relationships of all kinds) may similarly enable them to work on long-standing disputes and unresolved conflicts in which forgiveness has only been partially extended (cf. Earp & Savulescu, 2020; Paiella, 2021; Ducharme, 2023).

Finally, what of the concern with which we began: psychedelic moral enhancement? Our speculations in this chapter, if they are on the mark, provide a way of understanding how the putative moral enhancement effects of psychedelic experiences might come about. The implications here extend far beyond the domain of forgiveness. 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. To paraphrase one psilocybin subject: perhaps, in some cases, psychedelic experiences can “[bring our moral] beliefs to life, [make] them real, something tangible and true... more than [just] something to think about” (Malone et al., 2018, p. 4). This certainly seems like an idea worth investigating.

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