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## NEURO-APOCALYPSE FOUR: THE MONKEY WRENCH



The usual *gestalt* mode of perception, where the figure is noticed and the ground ignored, seems to be modified. One sees instead the figure-ground as a totality... Conceptually, it appears obvious that such opposite categories as being and non-being, light and darkness, good and bad, solid and space are related mutually in the same way as front and back. This may come as a shock to the kinesthetic sense, a threat to one's identity, and a disturbance to standards and habits of judgment. The individual unused to this situation may interpret it onesidedly: he may feel utterly helpless, wondering whether he can continue to think logically or even speak correctly, or conversely, he may imagine that he is God almighty, in charge of the whole universe.<sup>493</sup>

Allan Watts, describing LSD

I once saw this happen to a hippy, who spent an entire night running around a beach party shouting that he was Jesus, God and various other things, including "I'M EVERYTHING!" He was naked, of course, and like Adam he was not ashamed, but people soon lost patience with him, and started shouting abuse back. The dogs, however, chased him happily around the sand until the morning, when he finally collapsed in a heap for a well-earned day of rest. I bumped into him a few days later, and found him sunburnt, humourless, and unfriendly, apparently no better for his temporary deification.

Many orthodox mystics object that mind-bending paths are not valid paths because there is no shortcut to God, but anyone who really works

with entheogens knows that this path is long and hard. The hippy had a big whack of gnosis, with all William James' indexes of a textbook mystical experience - shedding concerns and conditioning, realising hidden truths, being overwhelmed by newness.<sup>494</sup> But what about when it wears off? My beloved ayahuasca revs up the occipital and frontal lobes,<sup>495</sup> and offers a new perspective on your problems, but it does not solve them. It lends brilliance to the inhibited, comfort to the nervous, and grace to the hopelessly formal, but it snatches these jewels away. It dissolves the lines, but they form again. Plenty give up smoking after a few glasses of ayahuasca, only to start again after a few glasses of beer. We return to abusive relationships and destructive cycles. The only guarantee with ayahuasca is that if you fail to put into practise what you learn, you will suffer. Many continue without ironing out their creases, only to enter a hell of perpetual regret every session, and it can be easier to give up the practice than break ingrained habits. Having soared to the heights, you slip back into the mud, and it is up to you to drag yourself out. But at least you know which way to crawl.

Ayahuasca contains DMT, a neurotransmitter produced naturally by the pineal gland, and also by various plants. It does what might be described as fiddling the neurological graphic equaliser, increasing theta waves, which are associated with meditation, relaxation, and hypnogogic states. Alpha waves also increase, keeping the lucky owner of the brain aware and awake.<sup>496</sup> The greatest shifts are in the left temporal lobe, concerned with verbal organisation, memory, and speech. With ayahuasca, words are freed from the normal rules, and poetry pushes at the limits of thought. Many shamans speak in metaphors to express the ineffable; the language is called "language-twisting-twisting".<sup>497</sup> Daimic teachings are 'received' as songs, from the depths of the unconscious or the lips of spirits, depending on where you draw your lines, but whatever the source, they arrive fully formed, with melody and message, rhythm, rhyme, and reason. Creative wit breezes through the warm afterglow of a session, where every word and gesture is loaded with significance, and the insights persist after the brew has worn off. With time and determination, the ayahuasca worlds and normal worlds come closer, and the pulse of life and the wisdom of the whole are obvious whenever you remember to look, even without a drink.

There are other entheogens, and other enthusiasts. The first Westerner to publish his experiences with magick mushrooms described "the five senses disembodied, ... all of them blending into one another most strangely, until the person, utterly passive, becomes a pure receptor, infinitely delicate, of sensations."<sup>498</sup> Like meditation, psilocybin decreases temporal and parietal lobe activity, and the world becomes a more fluid place. Lying under an apple tree on mushrooms, one becomes absorbed into it, can feel the tree melt into the earth and air around it, into the process of growth and the work of the whole intelligent cosmos. Inhibition of the occipital lobes produces

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trails, distortions, vivid colours and all kinds of fun in the visual field, but psilocybin also stimulates the frontal lobes, which helps reveal the profound significance of the tree.<sup>499</sup>

Ketamine limits information arriving at the parietal lobe by blocking the NMDA-PCP receptor,<sup>500</sup> and the psychonaut typically melts into the whole (or the K-hole). This receptor is widely distributed in the brain, involved in language, thought, memory, emotion, and perception,<sup>501</sup> all of which are disrupted. The individual, his concerns, and his concepts disappear. Ketamine also inhibits inhibiting neurones, however, so some activity is increased rather than decreased, particularly that involved with image and sound. The internal cinema rolls on whilst the rest is snoozing, and the camera follows Indiana Jones into the lost temples of the deep unconscious. Something similar happens in the dream state, which involves blockage of the same receptor.<sup>502</sup>

Ketamine is fascinating, but such widespread inhibition can turn K-fiends into barely-conscious zombies, especially with prolonged use. Nitrous oxide seems harmless enough; it has been said that its most serious side effect is that it causes the writing of copious reams of philosophy. It works on the same receptors, and pushed the veil back for William James:

the ego and its objects, the *meum* and *teum* are one... every opposition, among whatsoever things, vanishes in a higher unity in which it is based... God and Devil, Good and Evil, Life and Death, I and Thou, Black and White.<sup>503</sup>

LSD resembles serotonin in shape, but there is no consensus on how it works. Eggheads and acid-heads alike agree that it is extremely powerful in teeny tiny doses, suggesting that it does something funky at a high level of the brain. As a catalyst for social change on an international scale, it is without equal.

Naked hippies seeing the light are a relatively new phenomenon, but there is nothing new about mixing potions and devotions. The poison path goes back through the ancient world and beyond; we were probably using medicines even before we were human, as drug taking is another trait we share with chimpanzees.<sup>504</sup> It is a kind of heresy to speculate that the ancients took drugs, but the opposite is just plain silly. There have presumably always been people with an inborn desire to smoke plants, to fire powder up their noses, to drink brews and eat roots that make you gag. When botany was the science of the day and the long arm of the law was shorter, what would stop you?

The red and white toadstools beloved of gnomes and leprechauns are fly agaric. It was used all over the pre-Christian world as a portal into the dimensions where such fellows exist, along with monsters, gods, devils, and the castles on clouds they live in. It is still used by Siberian shamans today.



Magick mushrooms were used at least as far back as the late Neolithic period, when they were drawn growing from the bodies of medicine men in cave paintings.<sup>505</sup>

Robert Graves argued that mushrooms were the secret ingredient of the sacred *kykeon* consumed at the Eleusinian mysteries; indeed, the food and wine taboos and fasts before the initiation resemble those preceding Mexican mushroom rites today. Graves believed that the imagery of Heaven and Hell was born in Eleusis. *Sheol* of *The Old Testament* is simply the silent abode of the dead, but in Christian mythology Hell becomes a safari park packed with astral fauna. For 2,000 years, including the period in which *The New Testament* was being written, anyone who was anyone, from Plato to Hadrian to Marcus Aurelius, travelled from all over the Hellenistic world to be initiated in the “shrine common to the whole earth, and of all the divine things that exist among men”.<sup>506</sup> The story of Persephone was performed, and as she travelled to the underworld and back, the initiants would see visions, described as terrifying, exhilarating, unexpected, transformative, unforgettable, and “inaccessible to rational cognition”. As Pindar put it:

Blessed is he who hath seen these things before he goeth beneath the hollow earth; for he understandeth the end of mortal life, and the beginning of a new life given of god.<sup>507</sup>

Other classicists argue that *kykeon* was ergot, and there are hints that it could be an ayahuasca analogue, but there is no doubt that something curious was consumed; an Athenian noble and friend and lover of Plato called Alcibiades was fined for serving it up at a party in 415BC, in one of history’s earliest drug-busts.<sup>508</sup> In the fourth century, after millennia of mind-bending, the mysteries were outlawed by Christian moralists. Centuries later, equally ignorant Christians were less successful in banning ayahuasca and peyote in the New World; they are still used religiously today, and often in a Christian context.

The blue lotus was sacred amongst the Egyptian nobility, the flower rising out of chaos at the beginning of time. This euphoria-producing flower also pops up in other traditions. The first port of call of the sailors of *The Aeneid* is the Island of the Lotus-eaters, where they eat and fall into a deep sleep.<sup>509</sup> ‘Blue Lotus’ is also the name of the body-swapping character who crosses



The blue lotus in ancient Egypt

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into the underworld in the Chinese classic *Monkey*.<sup>510</sup>

Cannabinoids bind to the same receptors as nitrous oxide and ketamine, and this noble quality has long been exploited in religious rites.<sup>511</sup> Mao Shan Taoism is derived from scriptures written (or received from a deceased female sage) by mediums burning cannabis incense.<sup>512</sup> Hemp is sacred in Japan, and the hemp ropes of shrines were ritually burned once a year at what must have been a pretty groovy bonfire festival. The boss stoner, however, is Lord Shiva, god of dissolution, of yoga, and of ganja, which he likes to consume in the kind of quantities one might expect from the destroyer of the universe. Sadhu renunciants follow Shiva by giving up everything they own, including their families and their clothes, and smoking chillums religiously to forget the mundane lives they left behind.



The Tree of the Hesperides  
(note mushrooms at  
the base of the tree)

Lord Shiva is sometimes sculpted with datura flowers in his hair, but the quintessential Hindu potion is *soma*. *The Rig Veda*, parts of which date from the Bronze Age, contains hundreds of verses concerning *soma*, how to press and sieve plants, how to store it and drink it, and what it does.<sup>513</sup> What it was has been forgotten, but it is described as exhilarating, intoxicating, curing, and song-giving. Mushroom fiends such as the Wassons are wont to argue that it is a mushroom. Some ayahuasca lovers note that MAO inhibitors and harmine containing plants are found all over the world, and produce good evidence that *soma* is an ayahuasca analogue.<sup>514</sup> There are even deranged metaphor abusers who think *soma* is a metaphor!

On the other side of the Indus, it was not *soma* but *huoma* the Zoroastrian magi were partial to. It was one of the two trees in the original garden of paradise, a tree with the gift of immortality.<sup>515</sup> Many ancient tribes had myths bringing together a garden, a snake, a woman and a tree with curious fruit, though the moralism and the fall come into it later. On ancient Greek vases, mushrooms grow from the base of this tree.<sup>516</sup> Of course, common knowledge has it that the fruit ('produced thing' in Hebrew) of the Tree of Knowledge was a deeply significant apple, but it doesn't sound like your typical Granny Smith. It sounds more like a Golden De-liberty cap gone wrong, the mind-fuck of a bad trip, a nightmare of division and alienation extended indefinitely. *YHVH*, the master of the ego, fears nothing more than the destruction of the ego, so dissolution, illumination, or integration is not in His interests. He whisks the Tree of Life out of sight before the couple can eat it, but some other suspiciously psychedelic guides help the protagonists along their way.

*Manna* is called “angel’s food”,<sup>517</sup> and it might be ergot. We may imagine *manna* falling like sacks of food aid, but in the text it is a secretion:

And when the layer of dew was gone up, behold upon the face of the wilderness a fine, scale-like thing, fine as the hoar-frost on the ground.<sup>518</sup>

The word is related to the Arabic *man*, meaning sticky, dewy secretions which appear on plants.<sup>519</sup> In *Numbers*, “*manna* was like coriander seed, and the appearance thereof as the appearance of bdellium.”<sup>520</sup> Bdellium is also a resinous plant secretion, and the line could also mean “*manna* was like a shiny, resinous coriander seed”.

*Exodus* gives a slightly different description; it is “like coriander seed, white; and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey.”<sup>521</sup> Ergot infects coriander, which grew abundantly in the Middle East. In the early stages of infection, the seed exudes a sticky, sugary honeydew, which drips onto the surrounding leaves. Modern naturalists have described its “white frosty appearance”,<sup>522</sup> and a taste like honey.<sup>523</sup> As the infection progresses, it quickly becomes toxic and begins to stink of fish, which also suggests *manna*. Moses warned not to keep it overnight, and those who disobeyed found it stank in the morning.<sup>524</sup>

In *Numbers*, “the taste of it was as the taste of a cake baked with oil”, and the Israelites baked it into cakes. Presumably it is not beyond the power of the deity to send ready-cooked meals, but *manna* had to be prepared before eating. Did the priests discover a process to control its toxicity whilst retaining its psychoactive properties? Hoffman, who did exactly that when he made LSD from ergot, believed such an operation was “well within the range of possibilities open to Early Man”.<sup>525</sup>

*Manna* sustained the tribe wandering towards the Holy Land for forty years, a story which recalls the psychedelic journey in several respects. When the boundaries melt and the psychonaut is released from the bondage of her conditioning, she may find herself lost in a boundless wilderness, with no more than a distant intuition that she is headed towards the Promised Land. Right at the beginning of the trip, the escapees are trapped, with their Egyptian oppressors behind them (representing their conditioning) and impassable waters ahead (the depths of the unconscious), but dry land appears for them to pass through, and then their conditioning is overwhelmed by the waters of the unconscious. The fugitives have no idea where they are going, but they are always led for the next few steps by a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night, sent by *YHWH*. Similarly, the psychonaut may be hard-pressed to cope with anything more than a few steps in front of her; all she can do is have faith and follow the signs. Finally there is the forty years, during which everyone who knew bondage died in the wilderness, so only the newborn who do not know slavery reach the

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Promised Land.<sup>526</sup> Similarly, for the psychonaut to become truly free, her conditioning must be totally lost.\*

In *The Bible*, visions are generally seen only by prophets, but the Lord appears collectively to the Israelites when they are eating *manna*, and in a synaesthetic manner: “All the people **saw** the **sounds**, the flames, the blast of the ram’s horn”.<sup>527</sup> After the wilderness, however, restrictions are introduced; only the High Priest ate *manna*, only once a year. He guards it, along with other items, behind a second veil in the tabernacle:<sup>528</sup>

Which had the golden censer, and the ark of the covenant overlaid round about with gold, wherein was the golden pot that had *manna*, and Aaron’s rod that budded, and the tables of the covenant; And over it the cherubims of glory shadowing the mercyseat; of which we cannot now speak particularly<sup>529</sup>

There are very few things of which we cannot speak in *The Bible*, but a veil surrounds these mysteries. The High Priest went into “the Holiest of All” to eat *manna* alone, whilst other priests ate bread together in the tabernacle:

And when Moses was gone into the tabernacle of the congregation to speak with him, then he heard the voice of one speaking unto him from off the mercy seat that was upon the ark of testimony, from between the two cherubims: and he spake unto him. And the Lord spoke unto Moses...<sup>530</sup>

This is the shamanic format in many traditional societies, where the medicine man takes ayahuasca or mushrooms alone, surrounded by his magickal objects, to contact the spirits. After communication, Moses emerges with new instructions, as the shaman returns from his journey with guidance for the patient or the tribe.

Whilst the High Priest sought to protect his recipe, the Lord doesn’t seem to mind drug taking. In all the hundreds of laws, covering minute details of daily life and decreeing exactly what is and is not kosher, nowhere are drugs prohibited, as they are in *The Koran* and the Buddhist precepts.<sup>531</sup> In *Psalms*, herbs are “for the service of man”, as Rastas are fond of noting. “And Gyad saah dat it wuz good”.<sup>532</sup>

Wipe away the dust of convention and there are plenty of good drugs in the Good Book. Rachel lets her rival sleep with their shared husband in return for mandrakes, which are a useless foodstuff but an excellent hallucinogen and aphrodisiac.<sup>533</sup> There is the intriguing acacia wood, from which the tabernacle is made, along with gold, gems, and fine cloth. Acacia was the sacred tree of life in Egypt, associated with Osiris, who travelled to the underworld and back. It was part of the *materia medica* and *materia magicka* of the ancient Middle East, and used to contact spirits. It also contains DMT. *The Talmud* notes that the burning bush was thought to be acacia,<sup>534</sup> and serenades it:

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\* The other major theme of *Exodus* is the giving of the law, but we will see in ‘The Mark of Zoroaster’ that this is almost certainly a later addition to the original story of liberation, wandering and arriving.

Sing, O sing, acacia tree,  
 Ascend in all thy gracefulness.  
 With golden weave they cover thee,  
 The sanctuary-palace hears thy eulogy,  
 With divers jewels art thou adorned.<sup>535</sup>

The word 'acacia' derives from the word for 'nonsense', which makes sense given the effects of DMT on the senses. Of course, DMT would only be effective orally if cooked with an MAO inhibitor; one such plant is *peganum harmala*, which was used in the Middle East for its hallucinogenic properties and to exorcise evil spirits. There is still a huge field of it by the caves where the Essenes lived. There is no known mention of it in *The Bible* (though many plants mentioned cannot be identified because the Hebrew names have been forgotten). Its Arabic name, however, is *harmal*, which also means both 'sacred' and 'taboo'. The former meaning has been lost from Hebrew, but not the latter.

This smells as fishy as yesterday's *manna* to me, but there is something far more fragrant in the tabernacle. *Ktoret ha-samim* (literally "the incense of drugs") is powerful stuff, which stays a plague when used respectfully in *Exodus*,<sup>536</sup> but is fatal when used without the proper protocol.<sup>537 538</sup> The secret recipe was kept by one family, and died with them in the destruction of the second temple, but it contained *kaneh bos* (fragrant cane), thought by some etymologists and rabbis to be the root of the Scythian word *kannabis*. The Scythians used it at festivals, where Herodotus reports it was "thrown on the fire, and, their drunkenness increasing, they often jump up and begin to dance and sing".<sup>539</sup> There was daily fragrant caning at the Jewish temple, but it was burned in the Holiest of Holies only once a year. There was clearly concern that the High Priest, who was also eating *manna* on that most holy of days, would be too high to keep it together; a chain was tied to his robe, so people outside could tell if he stopped moving.<sup>540</sup> There are also three kilos of *kaneh bos* in the holy oil used to anoint priests and Messiahs (*mashiyach* means 'anointed one', something returned to in 'The Mark of Zoroaster').<sup>541</sup> The Christian Messiah went on to use the same recipe to baste and bake his followers.

Though both Judaism and Christianity were progressively purged of their power plants by priestly mores and translators' tricks, other sources tell tales. Josephus notes, for example, that the High Priest's ceremonial hat was decorated with a golden image of the henbane flower, another powerful psychedelic.<sup>542</sup> Imagine the Pope with a ganja leaf on his mitre. Today, sacred psychedelia is limited to a few underground sects, and mainstream priests keep their bongos hidden under the altar, but drug use is endemic outside the church.



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Things have reversed completely from the days when the High Priest's stash box was draped in purple linen and sealskins, overlaid with gold and set with stones. The prejudice became near universal with the Age of Reason. Whereas one medieval rabbi considered psychedelics the purest of foods, and that the Tree of Life and *manna* were the best of them,<sup>543</sup> the joint is not passed around orthodox Jewish and Christian circles any more. The spice box passed around and inhaled at the close of Jewish Sabbath may be the last, faint whiff of stronger spices.

Dr. Shanon of Jerusalem University proposes that an ayahuasca analogue was responsible for Moses' visions on Mount Sinai, and that all visions in *The Bible* might be psychedelic experiences. Whilst this is entirely plausible, it might be a case of psychedelic reductivism. There are, after all, other ways of triggering mystical experiences. Various Bible stories can be understood in terms of shifts between states of consciousness, though this does not necessarily mean that psychedelics caused the changes. Consciousness submerges into the unconscious in Noah's flood. It emerges, and attempts to build a frame at Babel, but different interpretations clash and confusion sets in. Finally Abram penetrates through the apparent divisions to access the powers behind them, to harness his will and fulfil his potential. The whole Pentateuch can be read as a story of mind expansion, but the mythology is potent without the admixture of drugs, and it might be simplistic to reduce all mystical experience to chemical processes.

Both meditation and psychedelics tear down constructions and wash away worlds, unleashing the raw power of consciousness. "Man can make manifest whatever he directs his thoughts upon with concentrated attention",<sup>544</sup> as Uncle Aldous used to say. Uncle Al, who is rumoured to have introduced Aldous Huxley to mescaline in the first place, knew a little more about magick. He noted that we cannot make men from mushrooms, because in magick, as in life, our will must be in harmony with the direction of the universe if we are to make anything more than trouble. We can, however, push chance in our favour, and open ourselves to intelligences outside our ordinary minds. Descendants of Adam can you keep *YHVH*'s expansive urges in check? Your ally is slithering through the darkness, shape-shifting and skin-shedding, cutting through assumptions with his sharp-toothed questions. What is true? What are we capable of? What are we waiting for?

Ye shall not surely die ... and ye shall be as gods<sup>545</sup>

"Surely not?" thinks Adam, ashamed of the magick in his naked wand. And in which case, probably not.

"But what if?" comes a hiss from the undergrowth.