

BREAKING CONVENTION: ESSAYS ON PSYCHEDELIC CONSCIOUSNESS edited by Cameron Adams, David Luke, Anna Waldstein, Ben Sessa and David King. Strange Attractor Press, London, 2013, 299 pp. £15.99 (paper). ISBN 978 1 907222 22 1

For many years users of psychedelic drugs anecdotally reported sudden flashes of what we would understand as psi powers; telepathy in particular, along with premonitions and clairvoyance (Masters & Houston, 1973). Despite this, limited experiments in card guessing with subjects under the influence of LSD seemed to produce unimpressive results, and the prohibition of the drugs by criminalization led to a general end to research. Given, however, the recent interest in the role of ASCs in psi-enabling, perhaps it is time we looked back at psychoactives once again. If the psi function is related to consciousness, then just like the psychedelic experience the ‘best’ results simply may not be possible within the constraints of a laboratory setting.

“Breaking Convention: A Multidisciplinary Conference on Psychedelic Consciousness” was held in 2011 in Canterbury and attracted eighty speakers and six hundred delegates. In itself this is surprising, for following the criminalization of lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD-25) in the UK in 1966 research into psychedelic drugs has been severely constrained, and academia has largely sidelined the subject.

It was not always so; until the early 1960s psychedelic drugs were employed in experimental psychotherapy and psychiatry in particular in the treatment of alcoholism, for palliative care in hospices, and even in experiments into the nature of the mystical experience (Masters & Houston, 1973). On Good Friday 1962 Walter Pahnke had conducted the famous Good Friday Experiment at Harvard (Pahnke, 1966), dosing volunteers with psilocybin, a hallucinogenic mushroom, and having a control group given a placebo. The students who were given the psychedelic reported a considerable array of symptoms associated with the mystical experience, and the link between psychedelic experience and the revelations of the mystics and spiritual visionaries became a subject of considerable research and controversy. Pahnke chose to publish his results in the *International Journal of Parapsychology*, and there have been links between the parapsychological research community and the psychedelic research community from the very earliest days of the subject.

While Pahnke had created a double-blind experiment (though his methodology has since been criticized (Doblin, 1991), Aldous Huxley brought the attention of psychedelics and the mystical experience to a wider audience with his books, *The Doors of Perception* and *Heaven and Hell*. Huxley in correspondence with the psychiatrist Humphrey Osmond came up with the name by which we refer to these drugs, with Osmond coining the term ‘psychedelic’ from the Greek, intending ‘soul-revealing’. Huxley and Osmond believed that psychedelics were powerful tools for understanding the human mind, and Huxley openly advocated the use of mescaline and LSD by philosophers, poets and intellectuals. (It is often forgotten that in *Heaven and Hell* he also extolled

the virtues of ether, and even humble alcohol, in reaching altered and mystical states.) Whether the psychedelic experience should be categorized as a 'state' of consciousness is beyond the scope of this review, but remains an open question. The British Orientalist R. C. Zaehner criticized the notion inherent to much writing on mysticism (e.g. Huxley, 1956) that mysticism represents a single 'perennial tradition', and that the unitive transcendent loss of self in what Freud termed the "oceanic feeling"—or the Beatles so ably represented in the opening lines of *I am the Walrus* ("I am he as you are he as you are me and we are all together")—underlies all mystical experience irrespective of the religious tradition of the practitioner. Zaehner argued instead that there were three types of mystic—the nature mystics (he gives the example of *AE*, George Russell), the Eastern Mystics (exemplified for him by Hindu and Buddhist contemplatives) and the mystics of the Semitic (Abrahamic) Religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Zaehner argued that the first two types experienced the unitive sense of oneness and identification of the Self with the All: these he termed *monistic* traditions. The Semitic Religions, however, gave rise to a different type of mystical experience, with what we might term the Entity Encounter as a frequent feature, and a strong division between the mystic's abased self and the exalted sense of the Holy in the Divine. (Zaehner, 1972) As the first is *monistic*, the second is *dualistic*—what Zaehner termed an "I . . . thou" encounter. The value of Zaehner's critique and the ontological status of the mystical experience remain areas of controversy to this day, but questions as to whether psychedelics were a useful or a valid shortcut to mystical experience were extensively debated by academics and theologians until the sudden criminalization of possession of the drugs in 1966.

It was perhaps Pahnke's supervisor, Timothy Leary, who became most associated in the public mind with the promotion of LSD. Leary was evangelical in his attempts to propagate LSD use, and grew famous, being seen as one of the counter-cultural leaders. Once the Beatles admitted taking LSD, and as psychedelic rock became a major cultural presence, Leary became more and more a controversial figure. Some people treated him as a guru; those who despised the psychedelic movement denounced him as a Pied Piper leading America's youth astray; and others within the psychedelic movement denounced him on the grounds that his activities had led directly to the criminalization of LSD in the USA and UK in 1966.

Once the drugs were illegal, and licences even for medical research difficult to acquire, the whole process of investigation and research could be continued only at considerable risk to the participants, and the debate was sidelined. The psychedelic Sixties ended, and it was twenty years before the Rave culture of the late 1980s led to another drug, MDMA (3,4-methylenedioxy-N-methylamphetamine), reaching the attention of the tabloids. Since that time millions of doses of 'Ecstasy' (which may or may not contain MDMA) have been taken recreationally, and high-profile deaths and high-profile advocacy; for example, by some members of the Freedom to Party movement, have led to a continuing polarised debate, between those in favour of prohibition and the 'War on Drugs' opposing legalisation, while others, convinced of the psychedelic drugs' therapeutic, spiritual or recreational value, are calling for further research or decriminalization. This debate is emotional and often heated.

In a culture which has largely shut down discourse on the value of psychedelic drugs, it was therefore a considerable achievement to organize an academic conference such as “Breaking Convention”, which brought together speakers from a wide variety of positions, and in which the audience, judging from the question-and-answer session in the book, appear to have had an informed and detailed knowledge of the research literature and the studies that have been conducted. This reviewer was unable to attend the conference; I feel, however, that I have been able to gain a great deal of knowledge, insight and even enjoyment in reading the papers within this relatively short book. While only a fraction of the papers that were presented at the conference have been included, they embody a wide variety of perspectives, and even those like myself with just some slight familiarity with the literature will find in these varying voices much to challenge and excite. The papers are truly interdisciplinary. For example, Andy Roberts’ paper, “Season of the Witch”, provides an excellent overview of events in Britain in 1966 leading to the banning of LSD from a historical/cultural studies perspective; Ffion Reynolds takes us on an anthropological and archaeological investigation of the Boyne Valley necropolis, and Neolithic use of psychedelics, while Robert Dickins traces the literary expression of contrasting paradigms on psychedelics in 50s and 60s Britain in his essay, “Psychedelic Formations in Literature”.

Of particular interest is Mike Jay’s “A Train of Delightful Visions: Early Scientific Encounters with Psychedelics”, which deals with Humphry Davy and Robert Southey’s experiments with nitrous oxide, a drug that later led William James to write:—

Our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation. No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite discarded. How to regard them is the question; for they are so discontinuous with ordinary consciousness. [James, 1902]

Jay’s paper goes on to discuss hashish and mescaline and early pioneers with those drugs, though curiously makes no mention of de Quincey and others experiments with opium. While opium is not usually classified with the hallucinogens, it is a hallucination-inducing substance, and the omission struck this reviewer as curious. There is of course a substantial literature on the Romantics and opium (for example Hayter, 1988), and while in the past there was a tendency to describe Romanticism as anti-science, modern historians have traced the many connections between the Romantics and the Royal Society, and their art and contemporary science.

A number of the papers deal with what will surely be important issues in shaping future public policy towards ‘drugs’—the term is frustratingly vague and ill-defined—and in specific the psychedelics. Perhaps the single most striking is Ben Sessa et al.’s “The MDMA Debate”, where a number of speakers briefly present their position on MDMA and/or Ecstasy. Here we actually catch a glimpse of what is otherwise largely lacking in the papers presented in the

book—the medical studies. While some papers do reference the medical and neurological aspects, and are fascinating in this regard, in the main the conference dealt with the phenomenology of psychedelic consciousness and not the wider questions of their medical value or dangers, or the physiological, neurological and biochemical aspects of the drugs' effect on the human nervous system. In “The MDMA Debate” a host of papers on the long-term effects of usage, and potential issues and value, are evoked, and this paper would seem to be an invaluable starting point for anyone interested in gaining a proper understanding of the issues before considering future legislation in the area.

The central question for readers of this *Journal*, of course, is what value does the book have for our understanding of parapsychology? The truth is that relatively few of the articles touch on the paranormal at all, except via the areas of religious experience and mysticism. For students of Transpersonal Psychology the book is an essential read, but for those whose interests are more narrowly parapsychological only the paper by David Luke deals directly with our subject. Luke traces the long relationship between psychedelics and seeming manifestations of psi. Shamans in many cultures have used them, and anthropologists have reported at first hand seeming acts of telepathy, precognition or other paranormal functions by practitioners under the influence of the substances.

Luke also notes Huxley's development of the idea of the Bergsonian filter, by which the brain acts as a 'reducing valve', filtering out extraneous sensory input. Psychedelics, Huxley postulated, reduced the action of the filter—therefore allowing more information through, and potentially increasing the success rate for ESP (Huxley 1954). Luke covers the surprisingly small body of research into psi conducted with subjects in altered states; it seems impossible to generalise from these studies, which have been small in scale and with varying methodology. If, as many have suggested, the Bergsonian filter actually exists—and some evidence is offered in this book that it may be more than a philosophical conceit—then it seems likely that psi inhibition is linked to the filter ruling out extraneous psi information, and ASCs which may help bypass the filter may well allow psi information to be received. All this is rather speculative, but as researchers from Honorton (1977) onwards have repeatedly noted, there does appear to be a correlation between psi and a relaxed state in which 'normal' consciousness is somehow diminished. So why then have some experiments seemed to show no psi effect, indeed in some cases psi-missing? To use a crude cybernetic model, the reception of the 'signal' may differ from the 'processing'; so the perceptual confusion associated with the psychedelic state could perhaps then act to reduce the chance of the information gained by psi being effectively utilized.

Certainly the potential is intriguing, and further research needs to be done, but while the drugs remain largely illegal, parapsychological research will not be possible within the universities at least, unless parapsychologists forge links with the small number of psychedelic researchers conducting licensed research, and attempt to build some experimental designs into other researchers' ongoing projects. Luke's paper is a very brief overview of themes more fully explored at SPR Study Day 67, “Psi and Psychedelics”: this volume provides a useful background and introduction to psychedelics for those intrigued by the

Study Day, but is also of considerable merit as a volume of cutting-edge papers on one of the most neglected, indeed actively suppressed, research areas of our time. Recommended.

3 Baker Street
Cheltenham, GL51 9HG

CHRISTIAN JENSEN ROMER
chrisjensenromer@hotmail.com

REFERENCES

- Doblin, R. (1991) Pahnke's 'Good Friday Experiment': a long-term follow-up and methodological critique. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 23 (1), 1–25.
- Hayter, A. (1988) *Opium and the Romantic Imagination: Addiction and Creativity in De Quincey, Coleridge, Baudelaire, and others*. Northamptonshire: Wellingborough.
- Honorton, C. (1977) Psi and internal attention states. In Wolman, B. B. (ed.) *Handbook of Parapsychology*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.
- Huxley, A. (1954) *The Doors of Perception*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Huxley, A. (1956) *Heaven and Hell*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- James, W. (1902) *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature. Being the Gifford Lectures Delivered at Edinburgh, 1901–02*. London & Bombay: Longmans, Green & Co.
- Masters, R. E. L. and Houston, J. (1973) *The Varieties of Psychedelic Experience*. Winnipeg: Turnstone Books.
- Pahnke, W. N. (1966) Drugs and Mysticism. *IJP* 8 (2), 295–315.
- Stevens, Jay (1988) *Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream*. New York: Grove Press.
- Zaehner, R. C. (1972) *Drugs, Mysticism and Make-Believe*. London: William Collins.

REIMAGINING THE SOUL: AFTERLIFE IN THE AGE OF MATTER by Douglas M. Stokes. McFarland & Company, London, 2014. 206 pp. £34.14. ISBN 978 0 786 47707 4

Reimagining the Soul might seem timely in an era where some neuroscience pundits—possibly prematurely—have more or less declared victory for materialism (Borr, 2013; Churchland, 2013). By way of contrast, Douglas Stokes's latest book attempts to reconsider soul and afterlife in the context of twenty-first-century science. Myriad traditions have offered various interpretations of what a 'soul' (and self) might be. This includes the self as person, the soul as a 'dream' or 'astral' body, soul as personality, soul as centre of pure consciousness, no-soul, multiple souls or selves and collective souls. If this list begins to sound dizzying, it captures the flavour of the book. At several points Stokes himself seems to favour the idea of the soul as a "centre of pure consciousness" that is detachable and possibly transferable between different bodies. "It is likely," he writes, "that such centres of consciousness would enter the body well after birth and will exit well before death" (p.8).

Chapter One tackles the problem of free will versus a deterministic universe. A good number of mainstream philosophers of mind and neuroscience deny the possibility of free will, often in the same breath as they deny the existence of a 'self'. Stokes passes over these arguments, and notes the death of determinism with the birth of quantum theory, before offering his view on the free-will debates. Stokes considers it almost self-evident that we can make choices