

Running head: PARTICIPATORY PSYCHEDELIA: TRANSPERSONAL THEORY, RELIGIOUS STUDIES, AND  
CHEMICALLY-ALTERED (ALCHEMICAL) CONSCIOUSNESS

Participatory Psychedelia:

Transpersonal Theory, Religious Studies, and Chemically-Altered (Alchemical) Consciousness

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## Abstract

The principal aim of this essay is to explore the influence of chemically-altered, or *alchemical* consciousness, not only on the founding and ongoing articulation of transpersonal theory, but on the origins of spirituality more generally. I attempt to support and expand Jorge Ferrer's participatory turn toward "a more relaxed spiritual universalism" in the context of Gregg Lahood's notion of psychedelically-induced cosmological hybridization and Robert Bellah's account of religion in terms of "non-ordinary realities." I also draw upon Richard Doyle's thesis that psychedelics have functioned as "rhetorical adjuncts" in the evolution of spiritual discourse, as well as Michael Rinella's study of the interplay between speech (the *logistikon*) and psychedelics (the *pharmakon*) in ancient Greek spirituality. Rather than seeking some form of *authoritative disambiguation*, as Lahood argues the first wave of transpersonalism did by turning to Perennialism, the anomalous, ineffable, and participatory nature of alchemical consciousness is affirmed as a fertile source of open-ended rhetorical strategies for both consciousness transformation and cosmological (re)construction.

Keywords: psychedelics, rhetoric, transpersonal theory, religious studies, consciousness

### **Preface: Take it and eat it.**

God is not like a man: He is the Book. A book that is born from the earth, a sacred Book whose birth makes the world shake. It is the Book of God that speaks to me in order for me to speak. It counsels me, it teaches me, it tells me what I have to say to men, to the sick, to life. The Book appears and I learn new words.

–Mazatec curandera Maria Sabina identifying psilocybin mushrooms with “the Book” (Doyle, 2011, p. 108).

Walking alone on a quiet beach at dawn, I found an old, leather-bound book half buried in the sand whose title, once stamped with golden letters, was now too worn to decipher. I opened it, discovering inside that a cavity had been carved out of the pages to make room for its pharmacological contents: seven nearly dried *psilocybe cyanescens* mushrooms. I removed and ate them one by one, leaving behind a bluish-purple outline on the page. As I swallowed the last mushroom, I noticed the text beneath the blue stains and realized I must be holding the *Bible*. The text, from *Revelation*, chapter 10, read:

Go, take the book which is open in the hand of the angel who stands on the sea and on the land...Take it and eat it; it will make your stomach bitter, but in your mouth it will be sweet as honey.

I looked up from the page and was immediately struck by the first beam of light from the Sun as it rose above the ocean horizon. Its light carried with it a powerful sound, like a cosmic trumpet, which knocked me to the ground. I dropped the book and laid in the sand with my hands covering my face to shield me from the synesthetic storm. A sinkhole opened beneath me, as

though I were passing through the vortex of an hourglass. My body descended into darkness. In a moment, all was silent and still, until suddenly, my consciousness was turned inside-out.

I awoke to find myself in bed, the first gentle glow of sunrise gleaming through a crack between the curtains. It had been a dream. As I rubbed my eyes to greet the new day, all sorts of metaphysical questions occurred to me. The dream was vivid and visceral enough that I wondered if I should expect the onset of a psychedelic experience in the next 15 or 20 minutes as a result of the placebo effect having lead my pineal gland to release a bit of its own secret stash of DMT (Doyle, 2011, pgs. 21, 33). Might my psyche find a way to blend my psychedelic dream with what “I” call “reality”—“I,” the “normal waking, rational consciousness” that William James so eloquently relativized in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*? Alas, no such alteration of my consciousness was forthcoming, but I was left wondering, like James, what the meaning of this abrupt transition could be. As James (1982) put it, reflecting upon his psychedelic encounters with nitrous oxide,

No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded...they may determine attitudes though they cannot furnish formulas, and open a region though they fail to give a map...At any rate, they forbid a premature closing of our accounts with reality. Looking back on my own experiences, they all converge towards a kind of insight to which I cannot help ascribing some metaphysical significance. (p. 388)

As James well knew, consciousness is not easily made into an object fit for scientific study, if it can be so studied at all. The nearest approach to such a study appears most effective when one pays close attention to *alterations* in consciousness, to the transitions between dreaming and

waking, or indeed, to the transformations brought about by the ingestion of one of many psychedelic chemicals. These peculiar chemicals, found throughout the plant and fungi kingdoms, and often close cousins of mammalian neurotransmitters, provide the fields of consciousness and transpersonal studies with the equivalent of Galileo's telescope or Hooke's microscope.<sup>1</sup> The effect of psychedelic instruments has been variously described by experimenters as an expansion and/or an intensification of everyday consciousness. But these are metaphors: unlike normal scientific instruments for observation of the very large or the very small, consciousness has no size and cannot be measured. As transpersonal instruments and participatory technologies, psychedelics call into question the very identity of the scientist doing the observation. In such experiments, the "object" of study, consciousness, becomes both observer and observed. These recursive effects make psychedelic experiments an especially fruitful method of participatory spiritual inquiry.

### **Transpersonal Theory, Religious Studies, and Alchemical Consciousness**

Transpersonal theory emerged in the wake of the radical political and spiritual upheaval of the 1960s, finding its principle expression in the work of Abe Maslow and Stanislav Grof. As Gregg Lahood (2007) has argued, the so-called *Philosophia Perennis* functioned for this first wave of transpersonalism

as a masking device, or a prestigious, protective, and seemingly authoritative sacred canopy with which to wheel a marginal, subversive, and unimaginably

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<sup>1</sup> An analogy that many psychonauts have found appropriate, including Stanislav Grof (2005, p. 125), Ralph Metzner (1999, p. 81), and Alan Watts (1965).

anomalous psychedelic epistemology into the heart of what William Blake called  
Newton's sleep, or the hyperrational West. (p. 4)

In other words, through what Lahood (2008) calls the “post-rational sorcery” (p. 159) of countercultural figures like Aldous Huxley (1945, 1954), Timothy Leary (1964), and Alan Watts (1965), the psychedelic experience became sutured to a precariously universalized but nonetheless rhetorically powerful hybridization of the world's great religious traditions. According to Lahood (2008), transpersonalism is “still evolving through a major conceptual crisis in its worldview” (p. 159). The second wave of transpersonalism could be said to have emerged with Jorge Ferrer's publication of *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory: A Participatory Vision of Human Spirituality* (2002). Ferrer deconstructs the explicitly universalist and residual Cartesian assumptions of the first wave of transpersonal thinkers in order to reconstruct the discipline within the context of “a more relaxed spiritual universalism” (p. 183).

The principal aim of this essay is to explore the influence of chemically-altered, or *alchemical* consciousness, not only on the founding and ongoing articulation of transpersonal theory, but on the origins of spirituality more generally. Alchemical consciousness has been intimately bound up with religious innovation for thousands of years. Accordingly, I argue that the emergence of transpersonalism out of the foment of the 1960s is just the most recent example of the radical rhetorical effects of psychedelics on spirituality. I also attempt to support and expand Lahood's notion of psychedelically-induced cosmological hybridization by drawing upon Richard Doyle's (2011) thesis that psychedelics have functioned as “rhetorical adjuncts” in the evolution of spiritual discourse, as well as Michael Rinella's (2012) study of the interplay between speech (the *logistikon*) and psychedelics (the *pharmakon*) in ancient Greek spirituality. From Doyle's

perspective, rhetoric is not simply persuasive speech leading one astray from the truth, but, due to its role in sexual selection, the engine of biological novelty; *rhetoric*, in other words, *is an ecological practice* (p. 121). Just as flowers evolved as rhetorical devices for getting the attention of bees, and male peacock plumage for getting the attention of female peacocks, human rhetorical strategies have been evolutionarily selected for their eloquence (p. 127-173). The degree to which such rhetoric truly or falsely corresponds to reality is biologically irrelevant, since it is precisely the creative *appearance* of beauty and its boundary dissolving effect as an “attention sink” that has guided the evolution of life on earth, determining through genetic and symbolic inheritance the bodily and behavioral patterns that shape our lives (p. 146, 170). In the context of biological evolution, what begins as appearance can in the future become reality. Psychedelics function as “rhetorical adjuncts” for many species (p. 165-166), and for humans in particular

are involved in an intense inclination to speak unto silence, to write and sing in a time not limited to the physical duration of the sacramental effect...they are compounds whose most persistent symptoms are rhetorical...[such that] language...becomes the occasion for a feedback loop, where utterances and writings that seem to enable the endurance and enjoyment of psychedelic experience are replicated, programming further ecodelic investigations... (p. 114-115)

Rather than seeking some form of *authoritative disambiguation* (Anton, 2010, p. 28), as Lahood (2008) argues the first wave of transpersonalism did by turning to Perennialism, the anomalous, ineffable, and participatory nature of alchemical consciousness are affirmed as a

fertile source of open-ended rhetorical strategies for both consciousness transformation and cosmological (re)construction. Before tentatively defining religion with help from Robert Bellah (2011), and exploring the rhetorical influence of psychedelics on religious consciousness, I unpack Ferrer's (2002) participatory contribution to the study of human consciousness and spirituality.

### **The Participatory Turn and the Representational Paradigm**

Ferrer's major contribution to the field of transpersonal studies was to defend the validity of spirituality without basing this validity upon the authority of the Perennialist tradition, at least as this tradition has been interpreted through the subjectivist and scientific biases of modern Western culture. These biases are rooted in the representationalist paradigm that has held sway, consciously or not, since the time of Descartes. As Richard Tarnas notes in his foreword to *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory* (2002), despite the radical intensions of the first wave of transpersonalism, its theoretical framework "[retained]...certain essential and usually unexamined assumptions" carried over from the historical background out of which it emerged (p. vii). From within the representationalist paradigm, truth is thought to consist in a correspondence between a subjective picture or concept in the mind and an objective state of affairs in the world. Both the Myth of the Framework (subjectivity constructs reality) and the Myth of the Given (reality is objectively pre-given) are potential symptoms of this representationalist dualism (Ferrer, 2002, 156-157).

For the initial Perennialist wave of transpersonalism, every genuinely mystical or spiritual experience, despite potential differences in its explicit description, must implicitly refer to a

single underlying and so pre-given spiritual reality. The research program for transpersonal theorists within the Perennialist paradigm is therefore to seek scientific validation of spiritual experiences by applying a broader form of the empirical method than that used in the natural sciences, one that includes not only outer, but also inner experience (Ferrer, 2002, p. 69). According to Ferrer (2002), though appeals to scientific verification were perhaps “historically inevitable,” and even “methodologically crucial” in establishing the academic legitimacy of transpersonal theory at the time of its founding, such an approach “has become today problematic and detrimental” (p. 70).

There are many reasons a representationalist/scientific approach is problematic for transpersonal studies, several of which have been singled out and skillfully deconstructed by Ferrer in *Revisioning*. One of the crucial problems with the representationalist paradigm for psychedelic studies in particular is that interpreting alchemical forms of consciousness from such a perspective leaves them especially vulnerable to dismissal as subjective *misrepresentations* of a pre-given objective reality. Despite the attempts of transpersonal theorists to expand the epistemology of empirical correspondence so as to include inner realities, contemporary academic research on altered consciousness by those outside the field of transpersonal studies has tended to argue for precisely such a dismissive characterization. For example, Revonsuo, Kallio, and Sikka (2009) recently argued that, while during a “normal state of consciousness...the mechanisms of conscious representation in the brain...carry accurate information from ‘world’ to consciousness,” during an “altered state,” “consciousness...deviate[s] from the natural relation in such a way that the world and/or self tend to be misrepresented” (p. 194). Revonsuo et al. (2009) go on to explicitly dismiss what they call “higher and mystical states of consciousness”:

“...despite their intensely positive emotional tone and significance for the subject, these states...tend to induce a variety of misrepresentations for the subject’s conscious experience” (p. 200).

There are many question-begging assumptions here, not the least of which are the dogmatic reduction of consciousness to neural mechanisms, and the substantialist reading of consciousness in terms of experiential “states.” It would appear that transpersonal theorists cannot beat natural scientists at their own representationalist game, since it is all too easy for the latter to reduce “inner experience” of spiritual realities to some kind of neurological malfunction. Instead, it is necessary to change the rules of the game by shifting the critique to the epistemological and ontological foundations of modern scientism.

Ferrer’s (2002) remedy for the representational residue in first wave transpersonal studies is his participatory, or enactive, vision of spirituality. Enactivism was first articulated as a paradigm shift in the cognitive sciences by Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch in *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (1991). As Ferrer (2002) describes it,

Participatory knowing...is not a mental representation of pregiven, independent spiritual objects, but an enaction, the bringing forth of a world or domain of distinctions cocreated by the different elements involved in the participatory event. (p. 123)

Rather than rooting the foundation of knowledge in a secure, unaffected and largely aloof subject who modestly witnesses the behavior of an external world (as natural science tends to pretend), Ferrer’s (2002) participatory approach to human consciousness uproots knowledge from the the solid self, such that the act of knowing is *transformative* of both self and world (p.

122). Alchemical forms of consciousness are accordingly best understood, not as “states” of the mind, but as world-transfiguring *events*. As Ferrer (2002) suggests:

...this transfiguration of the world is not...a mere change in our individual experience of a pre-given world, but...the emergence of an ontological event...in which our consciousness creatively participates. (p. 118)

### **Religion as Participation in Non-Ordinary Realities**

In his *Religion in Human Evolution* (2011), sociologist Robert Bellah attempts to define “religion” in the context of a wider discussion about *non-ordinary realities*, like those encountered in quantum physics, cinema, dreams, play, after ingesting a psychedelic chemical, or when approaching death (p. 1-43). Bellah (2011) contrasts such non-ordinary realities with the ordinary (or at least culturally dominant) reality of “waking, rational consciousness,” or what he, following Alfred Schutz (1967, p. 207-259), calls “the world of wide awake, grown up men” (p. 2). Unlike the participatory consciousness of religious realities brought forth through ritualized symbolic play and/or chemical alteration, the solid self of the “grown up” world of instrumental rationality tends to bracket the ontological implications of such “offline” activities, while attending instead to everyday practical needs and desires (Bellah, 2011, p. xx-xxi).<sup>2</sup> In this everyday world, a world Bellah (2011) connects with a felt sense of lack or deficiency, space is experienced as discretely separating my body from every other body (and so my mind from every other mind), and time passes in a linear fashion according to the minutes and hours of a clock and the days and weeks of a calendar. The world of rational consciousness is the world of isolated bodies colliding in a crowded container, bidding for survival in the course of neutral

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<sup>2</sup> “Offline” activities take place outside the strictly biological context of Darwinian survival.

(i.e., non-teleological) time, all the while haunted by a fundamental anxiety rooted in the fear of death. But, as Bellah (2011) is careful to point out, “*nobody can stand to live in [such a world] all the time*” (p. 3).<sup>3</sup> Ordinary reality is inevitably interrupted and overlapped by non-ordinary realities, typically with dramatic effects:

It is one of the functions of other realities to remind us that...bracketing [the vague sense on the fringes of rational consciousness that other forms of reality are possible] is finally insecure and unwarranted. Occasionally a work of art will break its bounds, will deeply unsettle us, will even issue us the command ‘Change your life’—that is, it will claim not a subordinate reality but a higher reality than the world of daily life. (Bellah, 2011, p. 4)

In the case of religious realities, the distinguishing feature is that they emerge from what Bellah refers to as “unitive events” (p. 12-13). Such events bring forth worlds of non-standard space and time, where the boundaries between bodies and minds becomes porous and the flow of events is inherently creative and meaningful. Accordingly, unitive events are notoriously difficult to describe in a predominantly representational language, which tends to construe such events after the fact as subjective experiences. Bellah (2011), like Ferrer (2002), is sensitive to the modern Western tendency to speak of experience in terms of something “had” by a private, inner self, and so chooses the term “event” deliberately to avoid the implication that religious realities are somehow not “objective” or real. It is also important to note that by designating non-ordinary religious consciousness as “unitive,” Bellah does not mean to equate all such non-ordinary events with the realization of some nondual ultimate reality. Rather, “unitive” refers to the way in

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<sup>3</sup> Italics are Bellah’s.

which the dichotomous subject-object consciousness of ordinary space and time is transformed, such that formerly sharp boundaries become relativized in a whole variety of ways.

As for a simple and unambiguous *definition* of religion, Bellah admits that cultural biases make this difficult. Following George Lindbeck (1984, p. 31-41), he lists three current alternative approaches to defining religion: 1) the propositional, 2) the experiential-expressivist, and 3) the cultural-linguistic (2011, p. 11). The propositional theory of religion holds that religion is essentially a series of conceptually stated beliefs concerning what is true. Bellah argues that this approach is inadequate since, while the conceptual/propositional aspects of religion are important, they are not essential to religious practice. The experiential-expressivist theory holds that a universal human potentiality for religious experience underlies all particular cultural manifestations of religion. The perennialist, quasi-empirical approach of first wave transpersonalism owes much to this theory. Finally, the cultural-linguistic theory holds that the symbolic forms of religion are primary, though “not so much as expressions of underlying religious emotions, but as themselves shaping religious experiences and emotions” (Bellah, 2011, p. 11). This theory emphasizes the irreducible plurality of religions, and so also tends to bracket the ontological significance of religious symbolism. Bellah does not believe it is necessary to choose one approach over the other, but suggests that both the experiential-expressivist and cultural-linguistic theory can be utilized as “coordinate approaches” (2011, p. 12).

In their introduction to *The Participatory Turn* (2008), Ferrer and Jacob Sherman construe the field of religious studies in a way similar to Bellah. They critique the “linguistic Kantianism” of postmodern scholars who would deny the possibility of real religious knowledge by pointing out

the ethnocentric presuppositions underlying such dismissals (2008, p. 26). There is no privileged neutral ground from which to judge the metaphysical claims of religious practitioners, since academic scholars are no less ambiguously situated within their own cultural and historical contexts. In keeping with the participatory approach, Ferrer and Sherman (2008) gesture beyond the scholar/practitioner dichotomy by suggesting that “some kind of personal engagement or even transformation...may be required for both the apprehension and the assessment of certain religious truth claims” (p. 26).

The “linguistic rationality” of ordinary consciousness simply is not capable of judging the non-ordinary unitive events at the generative core of the world’s religions. Ferrer and Sherman’s (2008) approach to the issue nicely complements Bellah’s (2011), in that while none of them want to dismiss the experiential component of religion all together, all three call attention to the ways in which language and experience mutually transform one another. “In short,” says Bellah (2011), “we cannot disentangle raw experience from cultural form” (p. 12). Rather than seeing this entanglement as an unescapable epistemic limitation, Bellah (2011) argues that religious symbolism is potentially a way of knowing capable of reaching beyond the “dreadful fatalities... [of the]...world of rational response to anxiety and need” (p. 9). In a similar vein, Ferrer and Sherman (2008) call into question the skeptical postmodern claim that non-ordinary religious consciousness is “overdetermined by cultural-linguistic variables” and therefore cannot possibly refer to “translinguistic” realities (p. 29). At the same time, they call for a “resacralization of language,” such that religious symbolism is understood to carry its own “creational weight,” since it arises out of the semioticity of reality itself (p. 17).

## **Alchemical Consciousness and Cosmological Hybridization**

The entangled relationship between symbolic formation, alchemical consciousness, and the generation and regeneration of religious realities has been fruitfully explored by a number of thinkers, to whom I now turn. As mentioned above, Lahood (2008) has argued persuasively that, by aligning themselves with a hybrid form of “psychedelic perennialism,” the “sorcerers and shamans” of first wave transpersonalism effectively participated in “the emergence of a novel mutating religious process on the West Coast of the United States” (p. 160-161). While Lahood (2008) praises Ferrer (2002) for “re-booting” transpersonalism by destroying the perennialist “idol” worshipped by its first wave of theorists, he criticizes Ferrer’s “Ocean with Many Shores” metaphor for its “tacit appeal to religious purity” (p. 163, 179):

Ferrer’s redeployment of distinct cultural/spiritual shores...may inadvertently reify a subtle fetishizing of cultural boundaries (instead of an appeal to one purity [the nondual One of Perennialism] we have an appeal to many purities, albeit in dialogue with each other). (p. 181)

Following Roof (1998), Lahood articulates an approach to religious studies and transpersonal theory within which the default condition of every human culture is to be in open-ended transcultural mutation. In this sense, orthodox purity cannot be opposed to heretical syncretism, since there has never been a time when hybridity did not go all the way down (2008, p. 167). As Roof (1998) has argued:

...religions are anything but immaculately conceived; purity is a fiction...they are unfinished creations, always evolving, their boundaries drawn and redrawn to fit new circumstances. (p. 5)

Such redrawing of boundaries remains especially pronounced in the “contact zone of late capitalism’s religious borderlands,” lands like the West Coast of California, where for more than half a century, psychedelics have functioned as rhetorical adjuncts bringing forth novel forms of hybridized spirituality (Lahood, 2008, p. 159). First wave transpersonalism, though helpfully deconstructed by Ferrer (2002) for its universalist assumptions, can nonetheless be read as “an early attempt at coming to terms with globalization and its related phenomena” (Lahood, 2008, p. 182). This first wave’s psychedelic perennialism was “a legitimate but largely culturally contextual project” whose major shortcoming was failing to recognize the extent to which it had cocreated a novel form of cosmological hybridization, rather than simply rediscovered a pure traditional source (Lahood, 2008, p. 181).

Historically, psychedelic consciousness has a marked tendency to generate rhetorical strategies for “...blurring...religious boundaries; breaking apart while, at the same time, binding together multiple cosmological postulates” (Lahood, 2008, p. 161). This is what happened in the psychedelic revolution of the 1960s among the “educated theory-making literati” (Lahood, 2008, p. 161), as well as in the Eleusinian Mysteries of ancient Greece (Paglia, 2003, p. 57-111),<sup>4</sup> which almost certainly involved chemical alterations of consciousness (Rinella, 2012, p. 85-87) and represent “the most important religious experience of anyone who could speak Greek...for close to a thousand years” (Rinella, 2012, 137).

In his study of the tension between Plato’s development of the dialectical *logistikon* and the ecstasy-producing *pharmakon* of the Eleusinian rites, Rinella (2012) describes Plato’s discovery

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<sup>4</sup> Paglia compared the “transnational mystery religions” of the ancient world, like that at Eleusis, to the marginalized and subversive psychedelic movement of the 1960s.

of the psychedelic qualities of language itself: “the spoken word does not simply effect the audience—it has a ‘feedback’ effect that affects the rhetor himself” (p. 214).

Plato, an alchemical initiate, was also one of the most literate and rhetorically skilled men of his age. Like later intellectual sorcerers of the 20th century, he was empowered by both the alphabetic and psychedelic technologies available to him to bring forth a novel, countercultural religious reality.<sup>5</sup> Unlike later sorcerers, however, he did so not just by making new *theories*, but by disentangling *theory* itself from a heretofore polytheistic and mythic consciousness (Bellah, 2011, p. 387-398). He stepped out of the cave in which the rites were performed in an attempt to integrate what he had learned into the “waking” world of daily political life. All subsequent attempts to theorize our human participation in religious realities are, in one way or another, indebted to Plato’s original form of participatory cosmological hybridization.<sup>6</sup>

If, historically and logically, alchemical experimentation has been closely wed to participatory transpersonal research, then it is to be expected that new forms of more relaxed spiritual universalism will continue to emerge from its theorization. These forms will be “more relaxed” because researchers who adopt the participatory approach become more self-aware of the way their ambiguously situated bodies and the languages they speak have the potential to cocreate hybrid worlds with others.

As Doyle (2011) has suggested, psychedelics (or as he prefers to refer to them, “ecodelics”) function as “transhuman technologies,” or again as “deeply participatory media technologies” (p.

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<sup>5</sup> See Doyle (2011, p. 29-31), where he analogizes the co-evolution of writing and human consciousness to the co-evolution of plant and fungi-based psychoactive chemicals and consciousness. See also Rinella (2012, p. 192-195), where he discusses Plato’s mobilization of philosophy as a form of counter-magic.

<sup>6</sup> As Alfred North Whitehead (1978, p. 39) suggested, “The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists in a series of footnotes to Plato.” See also Sherman (2008, p. 81-112) on the genealogy of cosmological participation.

43, 51). By this he means that they intensify the everyday “problem” of awareness, a problem that waking, rational consciousness tends to repress, namely, “its inability to narrate its own conditions of emergence [and submergence]”:

This difficulty of observing the conditions of observation...leads to a further difficulty of observing the conditions of observing the observation, and so on into an infinite regress of observation, until observation forms the entirety of both the subject and the object of observation and all other objects disappear from consciousness and only a mandala...can orient the attention. (Doyle, 2011, p. 77)

Though often characterized as ineffable, Doyle (2012) notes the paradox encountered by many alchemical experimenters, that the rhetorical challenge of psychedelics—“the continual disavowal of language *in language*”—itself becomes an endlessly fertile site of open-ended cosmological inquiry (p. 45).

Ferrer’s (2002) metaphorical Ocean with Many Shores is a crucial corrective to the Perennialist longing for the One Destination. Adding the psychedelic “trip trope” to this oceanic analogy may open up even more possibilities for spiritual exploration (Doyle, 2011, p. 21). The origins of the rhetorical trope of a psychedelic “trip” can be traced back to analogies made in ancient Homeric Greek culture between drinking alchemically-enhanced wine and setting out on a nautical journey (Rinella, 2012, p. 9). Norman Mailer may have been the first to use the noun “trip” in an attempt to describe his indescribable encounter with mescaline originally published in 1959 (1992, p. 245).<sup>7</sup> By the mid-60s, it had spread throughout the psychedelic counterculture to become the trope of choice. According to Doyle (2011), the trope succeeds in that it

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<sup>7</sup> As Mailer put it, his psychedelic experience was “...a long and private trip which no quick remark should try to describe.”

...[maps] the whorl of space-time characteristic of psychedelic experience...[and thereby] recuperates a psychonaut's capacity to articulate by compressing a thoroughly distributed experience into a serial one. (p. 49)

Alchemical consciousness is thoroughly distributed, straddling sea and shore at once. Psychonauts are never again able to plant both their feet on the seemingly solid ground of everyday, rational consciousness. The trip trope functions not simply to describe psychedelic events to others, but to relativize one's own consciousness by rendering into language recipes for self-transformation. "Trip reports," according to Doyle (2011), are "fundamentally rendering algorithms, clusters of recipes to be tried out, sampled, and remixed by psychonauts" (p. 50).

*Logos* itself—that which, following Aristotle, has been said to define the human<sup>8</sup>—is, according to Corey Anton (2010), best described as "a never ending tide of ambiguous merger and division" (p. 28). Anton (2010), building on the work of Ernest Becker and Kenneth Burke, brilliantly explores the way our human capacity for speech and so self-consciousness implicates us in an anxious search for some prevailing authority who might relieve our fear of dying, of becoming permanently lost at sea:

Logos transforms an otherwise submerged transpiring of organismal [birthing and dying] and vegetative [dreaming and sleeping] processes into a highly abstract, complex, and agonizingly lived-through drama enacted by personae whose lives play out within bids for cosmic relevance. (Anton, 2010, p. 38)

But even these submerged biological processes are recognized by Anton to participate in the ambiguous mergers and divisions of non-conscious logos, as when a sperm merges with an

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<sup>8</sup> Humans are the *zoon logon echon*, "the speaking animal."

ovum, which then divides within itself before merging with the uterine wall on its way to becoming a baby that will eventually divide itself from the mother through the process of birth. In other words, “logos [is] already rooted in the body” (Anton, 2010, p. 38). Or, as Ferrer and Sherman (2008) put it: “In our poetic powers, we do not leave the world behind but create after the manner that nature herself creates” (p. 20).

When logos becomes routinized in the form of instrumental rationality, it tends not only to estrange us from our earthly embodiment, but to struggle to authoritatively disambiguate the ineradicable mystery of our cosmic situation. However, logos can also, given the right religious or alchemical conditions, “reunite us with nature on a higher realm of contact” by granting conscious participation in unitive forms of space-time, or even participation in eternity (Anton, 2010, p. 42). Rational consciousness, of course, can never, “with one summative and eternal word, say all of our different mergers and divisions” (Anton, 2010, p. 43). But research on chemically-altered, spiritually-attuned consciousness suggests at least the possibility of “rhetorical patterns consistent with...an epic eloquence,” verging on “eternal speech” (Doyle, 2011, p. 109).<sup>9</sup> According to Doyle (2011), participating in alchemical experiments to “[listen] for the logos” requires “subjects...willing to be healed, perhaps even subjects willing to be healed of *being subjects*” (p. 110).

As much contemporary research is also suggesting, psychedelics provide the spiritual practitioner with a potent technology for overcoming the fear of death responsible for the fundamental anxiety dominating the world of ordinary rational subjectivity (Slater, 2012). Alchemical consciousness has the “disorienting ability to negate any essentializing voice by

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<sup>9</sup> Doyle cites an international study (Beach et al., 1997) wherein “over 35 percent of subjects heard what they called ‘the logos.’”

merging its symbols” (Lahood, 2008, p. 176), and so unlike an exclusively rationalistic consciousness, need not continually seek out authoritative forms of death denial. Their role in the ancient mystery traditions of Greece, not to mention the Vedic traditions of India (Griffith, 2006),<sup>10</sup> the shamanic traditions of South America (Metzner, 1999, p. 42),<sup>11</sup> and perhaps even the Biblical tradition of Israel (Shanon, 2008), shows that their influence upon the birth and development of transpersonalism in the 1960s is hardly a new religious phenomenon. As more scientific research is conducted, legal barriers restricting the free expression of psychedelic religion are sure to be broken down, and the open-ended cosmological hybridization so characteristic of transpersonal theory has the potential to blossom even more, gently grafting various branches of the world’s spiritual traditions together with its own creative discoveries into some as yet unrealized form of planetary mystery religion, a single cosmic tree producing an endless variety of salvific fruits.

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<sup>10</sup> The *Rigveda* describes a psychedelic drink named “Soma.”

<sup>11</sup> Archaeological evidence of psychedelic sacraments being used in South America dates back to at least 1500 BCE. See Dennis McKenna, “Ayahuasca: An Ethnopharmacologic History” in Metzner (1999).

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