

## Exceptional Experience Overview

In the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a new way of categorizing unusual experience began to develop.<sup>1</sup> Its appearance has been as dramatic as other large categorizing ideas, such as physiology, evolution, economics. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the discovery of LSD and other psychotropic substances spurred a proliferation of terms that ranged from pejorative (hallucinogenic) to laudatory (entheogen). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is more clear than ever that we need a term appropriate to the commonality in the variety of experiences engendered by substances, as well as those that arise spontaneously. Taking a clue from William James suggests that “Exceptional Experience” is well suited to span the range of philosophical, psychological, and religious experiences that have something putatively in common. Modern European psychology had divorced itself from philosophy and either pathologized these experiences or relegated them to (religious) superstition. The experiences themselves are not new; many have long histories. Bringing them all under the rubric of ‘exceptional experience’ can give a new perspective on their authenticity and help repair the rupture between psychology, philosophy, and religion. The category “Exceptional Experience” brings together historically noted experiences that have been diversely labeled as shamanic, mystical, religious, transcendent, or divine madness, as well as contemporary instances labeled psychedelic, transpersonal, peak, and holotropic.

Albert Hofmann discovered the seminal modern ‘psychedelic’, LSD. His subsequent work and that of others led to chemical investigation of natural substances used by indigenous people. The chemist Alexander Shulgin (Shulgin, Pihkal, 1991) (Shulgin, Tihkal, 1997) is notable for synthesizing and characterizing psychedelic compounds in the later twentieth century. As a consequence of chemical discoveries and investigations by Hofmann, Shulgin, and others, the realm of exceptional experience has attracted more attention and study than ever before, because previously in Western culture such experiences were mainly spontaneous. It is important to note that LSD was purely a chemical and could be produced on an industrial scale. Its chemical creation differentiated it significantly from previous substances widely used by indigenous cultures. It had no cultural guidelines like those for plants that were used in rituals of indigenous cultures.

Modernity has a penchant for chemical explanations, although exceptional experiences can be an outcome of a variety of practices and diverse methods that do not involve use of substances. Distinguishing exceptional experiences according to practices and methods or according to associated substances obscures their commonality. Practices and methods are culturally idiosyncratic. Focusing on chemistry misses the fact that a certain kind of experience is central.

A very common mistake in psychedelic culture differentiates substances in ways that even sophisticated experimenters overlook because they differentiate substances by what are essentially side effects. Another mistake conceives of these substances as ‘drugs’ like pharmaceuticals generally. The only legitimate point of comparison is metaphorical. Also, like pharmaceuticals, psychedelic substances have side effects that are not their central purpose.

In the 1950s the terms ‘set’ and ‘setting’ were coined to distinguish the central psychedelic experience from peripheral “side effects:”

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<sup>1</sup> e.g., *The 1896 Lowell Lectures* of William James.

1. Set- the psychological make up of a person comprised by conscious and unconscious events from a person's history.
2. Setting- the combination of the immediate situation a person is in during a psychedelic experience and the cultural context that is the background of the person's history.

Some 'side effects' may trace to a person's idiosyncratic physiological reaction. A person may react differently to the chemistry of different substances and conclude that different types of feelings or visions are the psychedelic essence of their experience.

Alexander Shulgin is the premier psychedelic chemist of the Age. His advice is absolutely to the point:

Psychedelic drugs are not the only keys to our unconscious minds; they cannot be used for learning and growth by everyone. There is no single drug or dosage level that will benefit all explorers equally. And it cannot be said too often that what is being experienced in the use of a psychedelic drug or visionary plant does not come from the ingested chemical components, but from the mind and psyche of the person using the compound. Every such drug opens a door within the user, and different drugs open different doors, which means that an explorer must learn how to most safely and successfully make his way through each new inner landscape. This takes time and should be done with the guidance of a veteran explorer, as is the case, ideally, with all deep emotional and spiritual explorations.

All of the above cautions aside, these tools -- the psychedelic drugs and plants -- offer a much faster method than most of the classic alternatives for the accomplishment of the goals we seek: conscious awareness of our interior workings and greater clarity as to our responsibilities towards our own species and all others with whom we share this planet. (Shulgin, Tihkal, 1997, p. xxvi)

Although experiences associated with side effects of different substances are often mistakenly associated with central effects of the substances it is effect of transcendence that is common to their most intense, culminating outcome. In indigenous cultural contexts, the central effect may be associated with entering the 'other world'.<sup>2</sup>

This essay contends that the various distinctions of consequence between practices, methods, substances, and experiences are inconsequential metaphysically. Besides the advice of Shulgin, it leans on the work of William James and Alfred North Whitehead for support. The argument here cannot detail every instance of relevant experiences. It will concentrate on broad characterization and leave others to explore the application of this argument to particular experiences.

This essay questions bifurcations and differentiations that have previously discriminated types of experience that we can now bring under the rubric of exceptional experience such as:

- religious vs. shamanic,
- material vs. mental,

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<sup>2</sup> This was called to my attention in a personal conversation with the anthropologist Peter Furst. He maintained that the image of an outspread hand silhouetted by color, found in conjunction with ancient cave paintings, is a way of saying, "Here I entered the other world."

- madness vs. ecstasy,
- consciousness vs. experience.

Some of these items overlap, because of the complexity they involve.

This essay will conclude by discussing some implications of Whitehead's cosmology for psychology with reference to Stanislav Grof's holotropic theory and some implications for community as *polis*. Whitehead's cosmology provides a new paradigm that supersedes Newtonian-Cartesian science and the associated paradigm that limits the development of modern psychology and prevents it from adequately explaining exceptional experience.

### **From Tribes to Religion**

F. M. Cornford's classic *From Religion to Philosophy* (Cornford, 1957) says that religion developed when people ceased to find complete and immediate satisfaction in the mimetic rites of primary sympathetic magic and needed something to represent the emotional experience they could no longer achieve in collective tribal activity. "The representation [men like Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes] called *physis*, and conceived as the ultimate living stuff out of which the world grew, could be traced back to an age of magic...." (Cornford, 1957, p. 124) Cornford thought analytical speculation about *physis*, the "animate and divine substance," which he considered the basic datum of religion, yielded philosophy, although he thought philosophy remained haunted by religion.

Our contemporary knowledge, due to anthropological discovery that was unknown in Cornford's time, understands that what Cornford characterizes pejoratively as "savage" magic are practices that are now properly called animism or shamanism. They are extensively comparable with mature religions. Cornford's dismissal of 'primitive' religion echoes British colonial characterization of "savages" that reflects Christian biases.

#### Shamanic experience

There were numerous "mystery religions" extant during the development of Western philosophy that stretches from the Milesians through Plato<sup>3</sup>. The origins of mystery religions lie in shamanism. From modern anthropology we see that the details and methods of shamanism vary as widely as the tribes that practiced them. Common to all, however, was a concern with spirits and the "other world." The methods of shamanic practice served to provide experiences of a spirited world. Their aim was to engender experience that transcended the affairs of ordinary daily life. In the time preceding the development of ancient Greek philosophy, mythological elaboration of some shamanic rites evolved mystery religion organized around the figures of Orpheus and Dionysius.

#### Orpheus and Dionysius

Orpheus's prophecies and his legendary music, which today would be called 'trance' or 'rave,' gave rise to his mysteries. Dionysian practice sought ecstasy from inebriation with wine, particularly at the decanting of the new wine. An important progression of Dionysian practice led ultimately to the great tragic plays. The term "tragedy" etymologically derives from *trageos* "goat

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<sup>3</sup> Knowing the history of Western Philosophy is critical for understanding the genuine relevance of shamanism to contemporary psychedelic issues.

skin.” Enactors pulled on goat skins to give license for acting out what today we would call ‘unconscious’ material. Enactors evolved into actors in the classic Greek dramas. Aristotle called the dramas “cathartic.” Freud theorized that understanding the Oedipus myth could guide cathartic treatment of patients in psychoanalysis.

Another thread of Orphic development gave rise to rites of the Pythagorean cult and subsequently inspired Plato to see mathematics as an important exemplification of metaphysical ideals. The descent of Orpheus and Dionysius to Hades and their return came to symbolize death and rebirth.

Orpheus failed to bring his wife Eurydice back from Hades after she died from a snake bite. He made the mistake of looking back to make sure she was following his lead. From grief, he subsequently would have nothing to do with other women. Nonetheless he revered Persephone, because she had escaped from Hades. She, too, had made a mistake: she ate some pomegranate seeds while in Hades. Consequently, she had to return there every winter. She and her mother Demeter were central to the Eleusinian mysteries, which linked to Persephone’s seasonal exile. Orpheus died when his music so excited Thracian women celebrating Dionysius that they tore him to pieces in their ecstasy.

### Eleusis

The rites at Eleusis honored Persephone and her mother Demeter in what may be the most significant Greek mystery. Nilsson suggests the rites served “to elevate man above the human sphere into the divine and to assure his redemption by making him a god and so conferring immortality upon him.” (Nilsson, 1947, pp. 42-46) Sophocles, Plato, and Pindar were initiates, as were many other Greeks, notable or not. Originally only Greeks could participate, but later others were admitted, including Cicero and the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius. The rites survived for at least two millennia, from the Mycenaean period until the Roman emperor Constantine and his successors outlawed them by establishing Christianity, instead of polytheism as the new religion of Rome.

### Initiation, death and rebirth

Comparable to the way the descent and return from Hades symbolize death and rebirth, initiation as a central rite for tribes marked the death of childhood and birth of adulthood. The designation of the ancient Greek rites as ‘mysteries’ is an etymological derivation from *mystes*, ‘initiate.’ For tribes, subsequent rites often reinforced the beliefs instilled in initiation.

Two important aspects of tribal rites and the Greek mysteries are meaningful. First is ecstatic ritual involving an experience of death to a previous way of being in the world and rebirth into a new one. It results in dramatic insight into the nature of things, seeing the world with new eyes. Pindar said:

Blessed is he who has seen these things  
before he goeth beneath the earth;  
for he understands the end of mortal life,  
and the beginning (of a new life) given of God. (Fragment 102) (trans. Sandys, 1915, pp. 591-2)

The second important aspect of initiation is the association of a way of life with the celebrants of the mysteries. Philosophy as a way of life in search for its meaning echoes the commitment of the initiates of the Mysteries.

Cornford's discounting shamanism as primitive and savage is part of a last gasp of attitudes toward religion and other customs that would begin to fail in the disaster of World War I. Ten years before Cornford's dismissive publication, on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, William James published *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and opened up a whole new perspective on religion. James presaged developments in sociology and anthropology that would raise shamanism to a level of significant comparison with 'modern' religions in Europe. Considering shamanism as part of the general phenomenon of religion brings focus on two characteristics, belief and way of life. These are central to modern religions as well but also separate them into very different orthodoxies. In an orthodox belief and way of life are usually connected.

The connections between beliefs and ways of living are complex, especially since claims of truth attach to them. Beliefs and ways of living can be considered from the perspectives of many traditions to explain how they help believers and practitioners politically, ethically, sociologically, and psychologically. Aristotle set the early framework for such comparison with his notion that *eudaimonia* (well-being) is the common concern for both individual and community (*polis*). In so doing, he continued the development of philosophy that Plato began, but he tried to extend Plato's work by classifying it into topics.

Plato's work established Socrates's effort to achieve self-knowledge as the foundation of philosophy. He then extended philosophy beyond the basic concern of self-understanding. He sought to characterize the fundamental principles of human understanding and the nature of the cosmos. Aristotle reconceived Plato's ultimate endeavor as 'metaphysics,' inquiry on a level higher than just investigating *physis*. Aristotle thereby implicitly opened a gap between *physis* (nature) and cosmology. That gap laid the ground for the differentiation that two millennia later, in the seventeenth century, began to separate the philosophy of nature from the rest of philosophy and gave birth to the modern science of physics. Cornford buys into the consequent modern idea that religion and science are separate and irreconcilable. That modern attitude got a major historical push from the Cartesian claim that body and mind were two fundamental but separate kinds of *ousia* (being) which, along with divine substance, comprised the basic metaphysical realities of the universe.

### **Material vs. Mental**

Newton's physics took advantage of Descartes's distinctions and pursued a separate path from religion. After physics, a whole range of 'natural science' investigations began to develop. The Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm held until the beginning of the nineteenth century, making matter clearly the province of science and leaving mind to the province of philosophy. The development of physiology in the nineteenth century blurred the distinction. The impact of technology was pervasive. It gave a major boost to physiology and, in turn, gave birth to modern psychology with its clinical orientation, which notably began at the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris.

Jean-Martin Charcot (1825–1893) took over the hospice department established at the hospital for treating madness in the poor women of Paris. The Salpêtrière became celebrated as a neuropsychiatric teaching center. It was the renowned place where Sigmund Freud went to study

as a young neurologist and begin his trek toward psychoanalysis. When the young Freud returned from Paris to Vienna, his mentor was the physician Josef Breuer, who created the “talking cure” for his patient Anna O to cure her paralysis of limbs, anesthetics, and disturbances of vision and speech.

Freud started practicing psychotherapy using hypnosis, which was the physiological method he learned both at the Salpêtrière and from Breuer. To overcome shortcomings of hypnosis, however, Freud began more and more to talk with his patients, gradually developing psychoanalysis. Freud conceived the idea that mental difficulties of his patients were a disease of the nerves (neurosis) that could be cured by talking therapy, a demonstration that mental treatment could cure the bodily condition of hysteria in his female patients.

The conviction that mental and bodily conditions are separate but causally connected is a basis for a great deal of neuropsychiatric research today, but the research tends to harbor an underlying metaphysical presumption that mental conditions depend on the material nature of the body. This presumption is potentiated by our cultural enthusiasm for the success of material technology. In turn, this encourages a cultural attitude that reinforces the Cartesian bifurcation of body and mind. That bifurcation often leads in psychology to the idea that mental conditions result from processes occurring in the brain and therefore can be treated by drugs. This essay maintains that body and mind cannot be bifurcated.

### **Madness vs. Ecstasy**

Exceptional experiences, because they are not like those of daily life, are very often seen by mainstream psychology as pathologically abnormal and classed as illnesses. Stanislav and Christina Grof introduced the term ‘spiritual emergency’ as a more accurate term for some of these experiences. (Grof & Grof, 1989)

While physiological dysfunctions can produce hallucinations and aberrant thinking, there is no evidence that thoughts can be physically located in brains. Because of this, Thomas Szasz denied the existence of mental illness that has no organic etiology. (Szasz, 2003) Although clinical psychology differentiates organic diseases and injuries of the brain from so-called functional disorders, it nonetheless presumes that the latter have an underlying organic cause that will eventually be discovered. Szasz’s work supports a criticism that the mainstream concept of non-organic mental dysfunctions as illness needs to be reconceived as a matter of unexamined feelings that originate in traumatic experiences.

Dreamshadow Transpersonal Breathwork, by its Whiteheadian extension of Holotropic Breathwork, maintains that appropriate treatment of traumatic experience is based on the stipulation that the past is real, not just a memory hidden in an unconscious place in the brain. This idea is combined with Whitehead’s concept of “subjective form” to explain that past experiences can be felt with the same intensity as when they first happened. They can therefore be revisited vividly. James’s understanding that consciousness is a function, rather than a Cartesian substance, makes possible cathartic self-reflection: through reflection a person can mitigate how they feel a past trauma instead of acutely reexperiencing it in the present. It is necessary, however, that a person who revisits a past traumatic experience does so in a safe and supportive situation. Otherwise, a person can be ‘retraumatized’. The contemporary phenomenon of ‘post-traumatic

stress disorder' occurs when spontaneous revisitation of traumatic experience happens outside of a safe setting.

Plato claimed millennia ago that not all madness is evil; but some is divine, exceptional experience that is heaven-sent and a source of the greatest blessings. (Plato, p. 244a) Plato divided divine madness into four types, prophetic, cathartic, poetic, and erotic. Instances of all can be found in Holotropic Breathwork sessions and in psychedelic and other exceptional occasions of experience. The Grofs' concept of "spiritual emergency" (Grof & Grof, 1989) echoes Plato.

An examination of the etymology of ecstasy reveals a paradox: the term literally means that a person stands outside of him or herself. The paradox lies in the idea that a self can be itself and also stand outside of itself. In clinical terms the paradox is often papered over with the diagnosis of dissociative disorder. But ecstasy is in fact a long-recognized human experience. Plato considers such 'erotic' divine madness to be an ecstatic love of transcendent ideal beauty. It is often transformative and frequently called "mystical experience." William James says,

The further limits of our being plunge...into an altogether other dimension of existence from the sensible and merely 'understandable' world.... So far as our ideal impulses originate in this region ..., we belong to it in a more intimate sense than that in which we belong to the visible world, for we belong in the most intimate sense wherever our ideals belong. Yet the unseen region in question is not merely ideal, for it produces effects in this world. When we commune with it, work is actually done on our finite personality, for we are turned into new men, and consequences in the way of conduct follow in the natural world upon our regenerative change. But that which produces effects within another reality must be termed a reality itself. (James W. , 1903, pp. 515-6)

It is not uncommon for a person who has an exceptional experience to subsequently feel discombobulated in the ordinary world. This is less likely in shamanic cultures where such experiences are intrinsic to cultural identity. There is, however, a phenomenon called 'shamanic illness' that sets apart a person who becomes a shaman. A shaman is chosen by spirits. The shaman does not summon up the spirits but the supernatural beings choose the shaman:

The spirits may cause the chosen one to fall into hysterics, to faint repeatedly, to have visions, or to have similar symptoms, with these events sometimes persisting for weeks....In a vision or a dream, the beings who have chosen the shaman appear and announce their intentions. This call is necessary for the shaman to acquire his powers. The spirits first lavish the unwilling shaman-to-be with all sorts of promises and, if they do not win his consent, go on to torment him. Known as "shaman illness," these torments will anguish him for months, and in some cases for years—that is, for as long as the human does not accept the profession of shaman. When the candidate finally gives way, he typically falls asleep and sleeps for a long time—generally three days, seven days, or thrice three days. During this "long sleep" the candidate, according to belief, is cut into pieces by the spirits, who count his bones, determining whether he truly has an "extra bone." If so, he has become a shaman. Some people, such as the Mongols and the Manchu-Tungus, initiate the shaman formally and publicly. They introduce him to the supernatural beings, and he symbolically ascends the "tree-up-to-the-heavens"—that is, the pole representing it. (Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 2023)

In cultures with organized religion, a person who behaves abnormally because of exceptional experience may be deemed a prophet or a heretic. Only a thin line separates the two. The fate of the person depends on cultural attitudes:

A perspective that was once widespread but has since been discredited held that shamanism results from psychosis. According to this view, a person would become a shaman at puberty when, especially in subarctic and Arctic climatic conditions, changes in his constitution and nervous system resulted in the onset of mental illness. Social and ethnic factors were seen to increase the likelihood of a psychotic break, as when a person who was born with certain marks felt he must therefore be destined to the vocation. His fears of becoming a shaman, according to this theory, created the hallucinations associated with trance, and the hallucinations reinforced the belief that he would inevitably become a shaman. While popular in the mid-20th century, a myriad of analyses have since discounted this view. Although they do not completely deny the role of personal crisis in shaman initiation, such analyses have postulated that the initiate's revelation owes more to broad cultural influences (such as the status shamans have in a given culture), specific historical circumstances (such as an invasion, epidemic, or flood), or population growth (the number and age of current shamans relative to the rest of the community) than by the mental health of the individual. (Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 2023)

In our modern culture the attempt to integrate exceptional experiences into day-to-day life can be a major problem because modernism exhibits a kind of madness that is clearly not divine. Many characteristics of contemporary Western culture are similar to clinical symptoms of schizophrenia. (Sass, 1992) (McGilchrist, 2021) The consequence of this situation is that it raises the profound question: How does one integrate into a crazy culture?

### **Consciousness vs. Experience**

Since Albert Hofmann's problem child LSD was born, a great deal of ink has been spent on attempts to characterize psychedelic and other exceptional experiences in terms of consciousness. That endeavor was quite complicated in Western psychology and philosophy even before Eastern ideas about consciousness were imported from the counterculture in the 1960s. Questions about the nature of consciousness had started to become prominent in the nineteenth century. Hofmann's discovery of the psychotropic effects of LSD mixed into twentieth century thought and culture to further complicate speculation about consciousness.

In 1904 William James addressed the problem of whether consciousness exists:

To deny plumply that "consciousness" exists seems so absurd on the face of it—for undeniably "thoughts" do exist—that I fear some readers will follow me no further. Let me immediately explain that I mean only to deny that the word stands for an entity, but to insist most emphatically that it does stand for a function. There is, I mean, no aboriginal stuff or quality of being, contrasted with that of which material objects are made, out of which our thoughts of them are made; but there is a function in experience which thoughts perform, and for the performance of which this quality of being is invoked. That function is *knowing*. "Consciousness" is supposedly necessary to explain the fact that things not only are, but get reported, are known. (James W. , 1904)



It is only a short step from conceiving that consciousness is an entity to attributing some agency to it. Even if we do not attribute agency to consciousness, the idea that it is a simple function can be problematic when it comes to chasing down self-consciousness. Asking about the relation of the self to itself threatens to precipitate an infinite regression that runs us up against the rocks of Zen paradox. Sartre appreciates that we face this paradox if we conceive of consciousness as a cognitive knowing: "If we wish to avoid an infinite regress, there must be an immediate non-cognitive relation of the self to itself." (Sartre, 1956, pp. lii-liii) The Cartesian paradigm founders on the rocks of this conundrum, because it closely associates the self's existence with cognition, which is limited compared with the broader understanding James meant by "knowing."

Whitehead offers an approach to explaining exceptional experience that does not involve consciousness and also avoids the problems of mechanism that dog the Cartesian paradigm. The heart of Whitehead's new paradigm is his concept of self-creating events, which range from the tiniest of electronic quanta to major instances of human experience. These events are happenings of feeling, not bits of dead Cartesian matter. Whitehead's new paradigm cosmology is detailed and complex, too extensive for a short essay. Its scope compares to Plato's, but it additionally benefits from scientific discoveries since Plato, especially those of the twentieth century. By considering that the smallest electronic events of physics have the same fundamental metaphysical characteristics as human experience, Whitehead avoids separating body and mind.

According to the physicist-philosopher Abner Shimony,

Whitehead supposes that the instantaneous state of an elementary particle must be characterized in mental terms, like 'feeling', even though the sense of these terms must be extrapolated far beyond their normal usage. His great design is to integrate physics into a generalized psychology, as Maxwell integrated optics into electromagnetic theory. Whitehead rejects the ... thesis of Schrodinger<sup>4</sup> that it is necessary "to take the elements asunder and to put them together again in an entirely different order" in order to relate the mind-aspect of the world to the matter-aspect. Whitehead rather regards the matter-aspect as an abridged version of the mind-aspect. "The notion of physical energy, which is at the base of physics, must then be conceived as an abstraction from the complex energy, emotional and purposeful, inherent in the subjective form of the final synthesis in which each occasion completes itself." (Whitehead, 1933, p. 239)

Shimony continues:

I do not wish to deny the obscurity of Whitehead's exposition. Despite its obscurity, however, it offers a possibility which Schrodinger has denied: the possibility of integrating the mind into a scientific picture of the world. (Shimony, 1993, p. 320)

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<sup>4</sup> Erwin Schrodinger's thesis is mechanistic. His underlying premise is that mind can be separated from body. He posed the notable hypothesis known as "Schrodinger's cat." A useful discussion of it can be found at [Schrodinger's cat - Wikipedia](#). Probably as a result of an interest he developed in the Hindu concepts of Atman/Brahman, Schrodinger created the 'cat' problem as a puzzle that could only be solved by consciousness. His thesis, on the one hand, sets up the 'cat' problem as a mechanical one. On the other hand, he sets up the problem up as one of consciousness. He seems to think that the 'cat' mechanism can be treated as an impossible problem in the material world but then can be solved by switching over to the immaterial world of consciousness. He says nothing about how to relate the two worlds. It is as if one could learn to swim merely by studying fluid dynamics and not going in the water.

Whitehead's technical vocabulary is not possible to deal with in the short space of this essay. Simony's point is that Whitehead's cosmology entails an understanding that psychological concepts like emotion and purpose and physics concepts like energy all comparably describe the character of a moment of experience. When one thinks of a moment of experience, the way one chooses to describe it depends on context, on whether one is a sportscaster writing about tennis or a poet writing about a kiss.

### **Conclusion**

Whitehead's career until his sixth decade was in mathematics, logic, and physics. Then he engaged philosophy through a wide-ranging cosmology. His cosmology is significantly Platonic, but it incorporates new ideas that reflect important discoveries since Plato's time in science, mathematics, logic, and epistemology. This essay finishes by focusing on implications of Whitehead's cosmology for psychology, particularly implications for explaining exceptional experience. Whitehead's concepts provide a new paradigm that supersedes Newtonian-Cartesian science. Implicit adoption of the same paradigm as Newtonian-Cartesian science has limited the development of modern psychology and its ability to explain exceptional experience.

Holotropic Breathwork may be the first psychological development that shares Whitehead's new paradigm. The discovery of the psychotropic effects of LSD in the mid-twentieth century has opened up a revolutionary possibility in psychology and philosophy comparable to what optical technology began for natural science in the renaissance. Optics amplified the scale of human vision so that it could observe at one extreme tiny cellular organisms and at the other the universe's vastness. Psychedelic technology amplifies human mental capacity in an extended way similar to how optics expanded human vision.

In order to harvest the benefits of psychedelic technology, it must somehow be integrated into mainstream society. Significant indigenous cultures used psychedelic substances well before the dawn of human history. The use was firmly integrated within the contexts of those cultures. The originating modern context of psychedelic substances was only chemistry. There was no cultural understanding or context for these substances: Chemistry does not come with a cultural guidebook. Psychedelic substances have surfaced at a time when modernity is wracked with growing pains, and apprehension of catastrophe. There is little effective understanding of how to learn from them and adjust our culture's ways and institutions to take advantage of their lessons. Those who glimpse the lessons now must take that up that task.

Holotropic theory Holotropic theory was developed by Stanislav Grof, who was one of the earliest and most important researchers in psychedelic psychology. He and his wife Christina subsequently developed Holotropic Breathwork as a means of facilitating psychedelic experience when psychedelic substances became criminalized. Holotropic Breathwork is important both as a *therapeia* for modern society like Socrates provided ancient Athens and as a means to return practice to philosophy after the Church removed the guts from it in the Middle Ages.

At the heart of Holotropic theory is the stipulation that each person is more expert in their own history than any outside 'expert' can be. Whitehead's philosophical concept of an event as a self-

creative entity underlines and supports this concept of personal expertise. Abraham Maslow's humanism similarly stipulates the necessity of self-actualization to reform modern mechanistic psychology, which has forsaken purpose. It continues William James's realization that a person discovers new dimensions to their existence in the deepening of exceptional experience. This self-discovery is more profound than anything mainstream therapeutic expertise can produce.

A central aspect of that discovery comes about because the past is real, even though the events that comprise it are no longer actual as they were when the event was first present. The full dimension of self-discovery depends on the fact that the past is real, as Whitehead asserts. It is not simply a phenomenon of memory. The past is a reality available for felt exploration. Its availability is due to what Whitehead calls "subjective form." Subjective form is intrinsic to the nature of an event because every event is a synthesis of all the events that comprise the past. The synthesis is realized in the idiosyncratic feeling that is crucial for an event to become as an individual, that is, a single actuality.

Though events are past, they retain subjective form, and thus they can be felt as vividly as they were when they were present. This provides the possibility of catharsis, based on the understanding that past trauma can be felt vividly, and its feeling can be significantly ameliorated when the trauma is reexperienced in a safe and supportive setting. The other crucial factor for catharsis is that consciousness is not positional: A person can in the same moment feel the past explosion of an improvised explosive device (IED) and the reassurance of lying on a soft mat in a safe room while protected by a compassionate 'sitter,' who serves like a *therapon* (attendant) from an ancient Greek temple.

Holotropic Breathwork practice is a potentially important accompaniment to psychedelic exploration. This will be critical in a future where psychedelic substances are decriminalized so they can be used in a way that compares metaphorically to telescopes and microscopes. The focused bodywork used in Holotropic Breathwork can balance the cerebrally oriented character of both scientific work and psychedelic experience. The intellectual character of our modern culture inclines science to overlook the embodiment of our minds. Bodywork is instrumental for overcoming culture's alienation of our minds from our bodies and alleviating the consequential neurotic issues that lead to ethical lapses, discrimination, cruelty, greed, quest for power, etc. Our psyche is reflected throughout our organism and environment. In Greek mythology Psyche is breath and life.

The world, according to Whitehead's cosmology, evolves as a community of relations realized in the becoming and perishing of actual events. Holotropic Breathwork takes advantage of the evolutionary development of tribal community. It brings participants into a community of feeling that arises when people engage together in an effort to understand how they exist both individually and in the world. That endeavor has been and continues to be crucial to our development as a species. Whitehead's cosmology emphasizes that events occur as a synthesis of relations to all occasions that have happened in the past and all the occasions of one's personal history, as well as the choice of how to relate to the future. The focus of psychedelic experience on people

individually contrasts with the experience Holotropic Breathwork offers of individuals' discovering themselves in the context of supportive community.

Community The breakdown of community may be the biggest threat that undermines our capacity to meet the challenge of climate change. Without political concordance no societal or technological progress can hope to overcome our impending climate catastrophe. Communal connection is basic to realizing purpose in ourselves and attaining ideals in the nature of things:

Reality is ... a shimmering presence of infinite planes, a luminous labyrinth of the active now connecting 'past' and 'future' 'real' with 'ideal,' where potential unfolds into actual and actual unfolds to further potential through free action and intention of the organism. It is a sea awash with significations, dreams, and desires. This reality we carry with us, an ever-present straining towards the future. The act is the cause; it is none other than the creation of meaning, the realization of the ideal and the consummation of desire. (Ho, 2008, pp. 334-5)

The passage above could have been penned as a description of a psychedelic 'trip,' but it is in fact the conclusion from a microbiologist's account of the physics of organisms. It differs profoundly from Cartesian metaphysics, where individual substances are considered the fundamental stuff of reality. In Whitehead's metaphysics cosmic reality is a community of related occasions that arises from the self-creative becoming of events. One of the outcomes of Holotropic Breathwork group experience of mutual, self-creative depth exploration is a sense of community that reflects cosmological relatedness. Holotropic Breathwork returns practice to philosophy by reuniting it with an authentic psychology that echoes Plato's long-ago method.

The result of sustained engagement with the holotropic perspective is Peace:

The Peace that is here meant is not the negative conception of anaesthesia. It is a positive feeling which crowns the 'life and motion' of the soul. It is hard to define and difficult to speak of. It is not a hope for the future nor is it an interest in present details. It is a broadening of feeling due to the emergence of some deep metaphysical insight, unverbilized and yet momentous in its coordination of values. Its first effect is the removal of the stress of acquisitive feeling arising from the soul's preoccupation with itself. Thus Peace carries with it a surpassing of personality. There is an inversion of relative values. It is primarily a trust in the efficacy of beauty. It is a sense that fineness of achievement is as it were a key unlocking treasures that the narrow nature of things would keep remote. There is thus involved a grasp of infinitude, an appeal beyond boundaries. Its emotional effect is the subsidence of turbulence which inhibits. More accurately, it preserves the springs of energy, and at the same time masters them for the avoidance of paralyzing distractions. The trust in the self-justification of Beauty introduces faith, where reason fails to reveal the details.

The experience of Peace is largely beyond the control of purpose. It comes as a gift. The deliberate aim at Peace very easily passes into its bastard substitute, Anaesthesia. In other words, in the place of a quality of 'life and motion', there is substituted their destruction.

Thus Peace is the removal of inhibition and not its introduction. It results in a wider sweep of conscious interest. It enlarges the field of attention. Thus Peace is self-control at its widest,--at the width where the 'self' has been lost and interest has been transferred to coordinations wider than personality. Here the real motive interests of the spirit are meant, and not the superficial play of discursive ideas. Peace is helped by such superficial width, and also promotes it. In fact it is largely for this reason that Peace is so essential for civilization. It is the barrier against narrowness. One of its fruits is that passion whose existence Hume denied, the love of mankind as such. (Whitehead, 1933, pp. 367-8)

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