

Plato's Method vs. the Neon Gods: The Holotropic Vision and the Psychedelic Renaissance

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The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato --A. N. Whitehead

This essay presents a critique of contemporary thinking about the 'Psychedelic Renaissance.' It compares the contemporary phenomenon to the original European Renaissance and continues with a brief, very partial sketch of the history of philosophy through Descartes.

Beginning with Aristotle and strengthened by the program of the Christian Church, attention moved away from the original purpose of philosophy. Philosophy began as a search for the meaning of life. The Church shifted the cultural focus from the search for meaning to a quest for salvation. It subordinated philosophy to theology, and it established priests as gatekeepers of transcendence.

Philosophy sought direct, mystical experience of transcendence and had no need of priests or other intermediators. For Plato, direct, mystical experience was the goal of philosophy. His star pupil, Aristotle, lacked the courage of Socrates and ran away when faced with a charge of impiety. Socrates's courage inspired Plato and opened him to transcendent experience.

Aristotle adopted Plato's understanding that the well-being (*eudaimonia*) of a citizen and its community were intertwined, but he emphasized the importance of independent individuality in his concept of substance (*ousia*). The Church translated the importance of substance into its sacraments of wafers and wine. The treatment of psychedelic substances as 'sacraments' in the Psychedelic Renaissance derives from the Church's usage. The focus on substances as the key to transcendence overlooks Plato's insistence that "long study and close attendance" is vital to sustaining the insight provided by direct experience. Many of the 'guides' that the Psychedelic Renaissance purports to train are the Church's priests in rainbow-colored clothing.

This essay extensively explores the ladder of mystical ascent Plato describes in his discussion of the fundamental nature of things, which Aristotle labeled as "metaphysics." Aristotle, however, thought that fundamental nature consisted of individual substances rather than ideal relations, as Plato did. This essay devotes particular attention to Plato in relation to the Eleusinian Mysteries, with an example of how the Mysteries are misinterpreted in the context of the Psychedelic Renaissance. Also emphasized is how Plato promulgated a method of practice as essential for understanding his teaching, in contrast to the current quest for one transcendent experience after another.

As it draws to a close, this essay recites both positive and negative outcomes of the 1960s psychedelic era, and comments on contemporary issues with psychedelic guides and neoshamans. It concludes with brief references to the works of Stanislav Grof and Alfred North Whitehead, which are discussed in detail in this author's other essays and writings.



1. Historical Context

In recent decades the term “Psychedelic Renaissance” has come into common use. It piggybacks on the earlier meaning of renaissance for the period in European civilization that was marked by a revival of Classical models and learning, roughly in the 14th and 16th centuries. The term is French for *rebirth*. The term “Middle Ages” was coined by scholars in the 15th century to designate the interval between the downfall of the Classical world of Greece and Rome and the Renaissance. Sometimes part of the interval is called the “thousand years without baths,” because the public baths Romans considered essential to their civilization fell into disrepair as that civilization disintegrated.

The Middle Ages in Europe were dominated intellectually by the Roman Catholic Church’s monotheistic theology. Despite promoting Christian orthodoxy, the Church retained Aristotle’s philosophy for his logic and other technical matters, turning philosophy into a sort of handmaiden that served the Church’s theological interests. The writings of Plato were almost entirely lost to Europe until Arabs, who had preserved them, brought them back. Thereby the Renaissance rediscovered Plato, whose wholistic cosmology Aristotle had turned into a metaphysics of details:

Though it never successfully challenged the dominance of Aristotelian school philosophy, the revival of Plato and Platonism was an important phenomenon in the philosophical life of the Renaissance and contributed much to the new, more pluralistic philosophical climate of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Medieval philosophers had had access only to a few works by Plato himself, and, while the indirect influence of the Platonic tradition was pervasive, few if any Western medieval philosophers identified themselves as Platonists. In the Renaissance, by contrast, Western thinkers had access to the complete corpus of Plato’s works as well as to the works of Plotinus and many late ancient Platonists. (Hankins 2023)

If we compare the use of the term renaissance for the current psychedelic era to its historic usage, we can say that there has been a ‘Psychedelic Middle Age’ from the end of the 1960’s to the second decade of the 2000’s. This period, of course, has been a time comparatively darkened by the War on Drugs. We can roughly say that the expansive investigations of psychedelics from the time of Albert Hofmann’s discovery of LSD to its criminalization in the late 1960’s compares to the liberality of the wide ranging Hellenistic age of classic philosophy. The ‘Dark Ages’ that follow compare to the darkness of the War on Drugs, although the time spans of these eras are dramatically shorter than the spans of the previous ones.

The medieval era developed gradually, rather than breaking sharply from earlier times. The Church’s concern with salvation focused on individuals as distinct from the community. Emergence of such an emphasis begins to appear during the centuries-long ending of paganism in the Roman empire and continues through medieval times. It is substantially amplified by the Renaissance and carried into the modern era. The emergence is gradual, however, contrary to the academic notion that Descartes represents a sharp break from the Middle Ages.¹ In fact, Descartes brings Aristotle’s lingering influence into modern times, because of his basic focus on substance (*ousia*), a focus which influences mainstream science and culture to the present day.

Aristotle introduced the static fallacy...which has infected all subsequent philosophy. He conceived of primary substances as the static foundations which received the impress of qualification. In the case of human experience, a modern version of the same notion is Locke’s

¹ An essay by Hadot considers this gradual emergence. (Hadot, P.; tr. Sharpe, M. & Testa, F. 2020)

metaphor of the mind as an ‘empty cabinet’ receiving the impress of ideas. (Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* 1933, 355)²

The Psychedelic Renaissance has not escaped Aristotle because its science focuses on substances rather than the mystical understanding they can foster, and it has also furthered Aristotle’s turn toward the individual as distinct from the community. To get a broad perspective on the current Psychedelic Renaissance requires us to recall that Plato emphasized a method that he wrote about several times in several pointed ways. Plato’s method requires long study. His one known experience with the psychedelic potion *kykeon* in the Eleusinian Mystery initiation is merely a single instance in his long quest for understanding.

Since the Middle Ages, Plato’s works have customarily been taught in a manner that emphasizes the nature of their ‘philosophical’ content. But the nature of philosophy underwent a transformation over the course of the Middle Ages, when philosophy lost its position as the quintessential intellectual pursuit and the way of life that leads to ultimate understanding. The Church interposed its priests on the path of understanding in order to preclude the possibility of direct experience: It established theology as a superior discipline to philosophy. Philosophy became merely a subsidiary that supplied theology with concepts and techniques, rather than a way of life. Even though modern philosophy freed philosophy in some ways from its medieval subordination, philosophy still has not fully recovered its original existential concern, despite several centuries of development.

With the advent of Medieval Scholasticism ... we find a clear distinction being drawn between *theologia* and *philosophia*. Theology became conscious of its autonomy qua supreme science, while philosophy was emptied of its spiritual exercises which, from now on, were relegated to Christian mysticism and ethics. Reduced to the rank of “a handmaid of theology,” philosophy’s role was henceforth to furnish theology with conceptual—and hence purely theoretical—material. When, in the modern age, philosophy regained its autonomy, it still retained many features inherited from this medieval conception. In particular, it maintained its purely theoretical character, which even evolved in the direction of a more and more thorough systematization. Not until Nietzsche, Bergson, and existentialism does philosophy consciously return to being a concrete attitude, a way of life and of seeing the world. (Hadot 1995, 107-8)

Regarding Plato, two centrally important concerns lost in the course of the Middle Ages were (1) his concern for direct experience and (2) his insight that the wellbeing (*eudaimonia*) of a person could only be achieved in community. Plato’s ideal community reflected the Greek city-state, which existed as a human community on earth, rather than Augustine’s heavenly City of God that the Church exalted as the destiny of salvation. Likewise, the founders of the American republic conceived their new state as a practical endeavor to realize a mystical ideal, rather than a city in heaven.³

Although Plato’s writings were lost to Europe during the Middle Ages, they were rediscovered in the Renaissance. But at that point they were regarded in terms of their intellectual content, rather than in their advocacy of direct mystical experience, due to the bias of Scholasticism. Even today Plato is not usually taught with attention to his concern for direct experience and the necessity of a method to achieve it. That experience is actually at the heart of wellbeing, and Plato sees it as intimately bound up with a supportive community. Plato’s *Republic* provides comprehensive evidence of that. We also have solid evidence that Plato explicitly included a method with his teaching. The evidence occurs in his *Seventh Letter* (below).

² Locke’s “empty cabinet” is the basis of the notion that a baby is born a blank slate, which Stanislav Grof disproves.

³ See Appendix, item 1, The mystical idea in the American republic.

Plato's method was so well understood that it endured for at least six centuries, until Plotinus, who, according to his student Porphyry, used the method: "by meditation and by the method that Plato teaches in the Banquet [*Symposium*]" Plotinus "lifted himself ... to the first and all-transcendent divinity."⁴ (O'Brian 1975, 16).

2. Plato-Steps to Ecstasy

The fact that Plato was initiated into the Eleusinian Mysteries is an additional testament to the role of direct, ecstatic experience as an essential purpose of his teaching. Such an experience is definitely the ultimate goal of Plato's method, but to sustain its insight absolutely requires the intense mental focus that comes from long study.⁵ In *Phaedrus* Plato describes the experience as a "madness that is heaven sent." (244b) (Hamilton and Cairns 1961) It is an attainment of the highest mental effort at the extreme of the soul's toil and struggle. "It is there that true being dwells, without color or shape, that cannot be touched; reason alone, the soul's pilot, can behold it, and all true knowledge is knowledge thereof." (247c) (Hamilton and Cairns 1961)

Although explicit description has been lost to history, we can characterize Plato's method in terms of the purpose it pursued, "the ecstasy of madness [and its process, namely in] the strict context of dialectics. These are the two ways Plato knew about because he had experienced them both and because he could not avoid traveling both paths. That in the *Phaedrus* he pursues these two paths almost simultaneously and with equal energy characterizes the special tension and unique quality of this astonishing work." (Friedlander 1969, 242)

Plato states the process and purpose of his method in his *Seventh Letter*:

One statement at any rate I can make in regard to all who have written or who may write with a claim to knowledge of the subjects to which I devote myself—no matter how they pretend to have acquired it, whether from my instruction or from others or from their own discovery. Such writers can in my opinion have no real acquaintance with the subject. I certainly have composed no work in regard to it, nor shall I ever do so in the future, for there is no way of putting it in words like other studies. Acquaintance with it must come rather after a long period of attendance on instruction in the subject itself and of close

Some meanings

Ecstasy-Literally means "stand outside," a paradoxical experience in which the self stands outside itself.

Madness-for Plato is not 'insanity,' but a state of extreme emotional intensity such as a person might experience at a rock concert.

Mystical- derives from the Greek *mystes*, which means someone who is initiated in rites devoted to a god or goddess, such as Dionysius, Orpheus, Demeter.

Dialectic-back and forth conversation that people engage in when they are willing to give up their own opinions and biases and search for a mutually understood truth.

⁴ *en to Symposio yphagemenas odous to Platoni ephne ekeinos o theos*

⁵ We do not know any specific details of the "long study" Plato urged, but there is certainly no reason to compare it with today's college curricula or the like. Nor can we think that there was some fixed subject matter, nor any material for study that would be unchanged over the centuries that followed Plato. Clearly, however, Plato associated study and method. That method might have been simpler and less changeable in form than the material studied. Also, Plato himself says that his fundamental doctrines could not be written down. We should best assume that the long study was meant to focus one's mind on ideas to question, to 'meditate' on them more and more deeply while in the company of a teacher and colleagues.

companionship, when, suddenly, like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark, it is generated in the soul and at once becomes self-sustaining. [present author's underline] (Letter VII, 341c-d) (Hamilton and Cairns 1961)

In the *Symposium* Plato has Socrates describe clearly and in detail Diotima's⁶ method of meditation for attaining direct, ecstatic experience. (Socrates says that as a young man he met Diotima, "a woman who was deeply versed in [the topic of Love], and many other fields of knowledge" (201d)).⁷ Her process compares to the stepped mental training of Tibetan Buddhist monks.

Diotima's method has seven steps:

1. Love one body.
2. Consider how one body's beauty is related to another's.
3. Love every lovely body but no particular one.
4. Grasp that bodily beauty is nothing compared to that of the soul.
5. Contemplate the beauty of laws and institutions.
6. Contemplate science—the beauty of every kind of knowledge.
7. Achieve the final revelation.

Diotima says of the final revelation:

There bursts upon [the candidate for initiation] that wondrous vision which is the very soul of the beauty he has toiled so long for. It is an everlasting loveliness which neither comes nor goes, which neither flowers nor fades, for such beauty is the same on every hand, the same then as now, here as there, this way as that way, the same to every worshipper as it is to every other.

Nor will his vision of the beautiful take the form of a face, or of hands, or of anything that is of the flesh. It will be neither words, nor knowledge, nor a something that exists in something else, such as a living creature, or the earth, or the heavens, or anything that is—but subsisting of itself and by itself in an eternal oneness. (210e-211b) (Hamilton and Cairns 1961)

This account of method in the *Symposium* has usually been approached as an intellectual matter by modern commentators, but as we noted above, the ancients viewed it as facilitated by meditation practice, and one that endured for at least six centuries after Plato, when Plotinus reported,

Roused into myself from my body—outside everything else and inside myself—my gaze has met a beauty wondrous and great. At such moments I have been certain that mine was the better part, mine the best of lives lived to the fullest, mine identity with the divine. Fixed there firmly, poised above everything in the intellectual that is less than the highest, utter actuality was mine. (IV, 8) (O'Brian 1975)

Plato presents a more technical version of Diotima's steps to mystical experience in his concept of the Divided Line⁸ in the *Republic*, his massive treatise on the nature of justice. In it he describes parallels between the just person and the just state, suggesting that for each justice involves a harmonious balance

⁶ Diotima is the name or pseudonym of a possibly historical figure, a prophetess who postponed the plague of Athens that finally in 430 BCE caused it to lose the Peloponnesian War.

⁷ Throughout this essay, reference uses Stephanus pagination, a system of reference and organization used in modern editions and translations of Plato based on the three-volume 1578 edition of Plato's complete works translated by Joannes Serranus and published by Henricus Stephanus in Geneva. (Wikipedia)

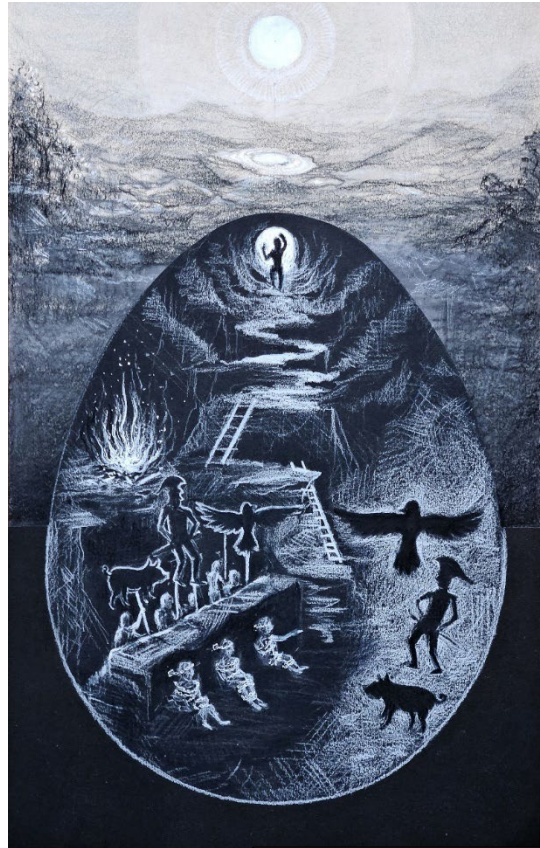
⁸ Details of the technical version are discussed in Appendix, item 2.

of elements. In the state there must be a social structure that balances ordinary citizens, soldiers, and politicians. (The idea of a harmonious balance of the elements in the state influenced the founders of the United States to devise the system of checks and balances in its constitution.) Plato's idea was reflected by his student Aristotle in a stipulation that the well-being (*eudaimonia*) of the individual and the community must coincide.⁹

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Recognizing that comprehending the abstract nature of the Divided Line is difficult, Plato offered an allegory that that can be illustrated with a picture of men dwelling in a cave. He describes a cave where men sit with their backs against a wall that is low, but high enough that it extends above their heads. They are chained to that wall in such a way that they can only look at the cave wall opposite, where they see shadows. The shadows are created by puppeteers on the other side of the wall who stand between a fire and the low wall. Shadows of puppets are cast on the wall that the chained men see. The men spend their time guessing what the shadows are doing. Next Plato says that one of the men is broken free of his chains and can turn around and see the fire and how the puppets are used to create shadows on the far wall. The unchained man excitedly tries to tell the others how the shadows are made, but the other men know of no other world than the shadows on the wall, which is the only world that is real for them. They assume that the unchained man is mad, babbling nonsense.

Next, the man is forced to climb arduously up to the narrow entrance of the cave and out into the upper world. It is so bright outside the cave that the man's eyes are blinded to anything but reflections in puddles. Eventually the man's vision adjusts so that he can see actual objects in the upper world. Finally squinting, he is able to see the sun, the supreme source of light that enables all vision.



illus. Roscoe Stark

In Plato's cave analogy, our ordinary world is a realm of shadows rather than realities. Someone who manages to find out that most people are preoccupied with shadowy things like pride, desire, money, and fame seems like a fool to those who are preoccupied with the shadows. One who goes further to discover true illumination may, in turn, seem like a fool even to people like professors and psychologists, who may have seen beyond the shadows, but still have not achieved enlightenment.

Plato's Cave Allegory is a story of struggle, up from a Hades-like underground. It describes a process that goes from a womb-like cave into a struggle that might take place in the birth canal, and finally emergence into the light. It is a representation of a process of death and rebirth, death to the womb world and rebirth into the world at large. Plato's concepts help understand the theories of Stanislav Grof about Holotropic Breathwork as a process. Plato's Divided Line also illustrates a way of thinking about stages in meditative disciplines. Plato's mysticism has significance for the phenomenology of psychedelic experience.

⁹ See Appendix, item 1.

A final, important part of Plato's analogy is that the man must return to the Cave, despite the insults and derision that he suffers from its unenlightened inhabitants, in order to bring them to understand true reality, despite their resistance to the arduous process that is required.

In contemporary terms, the men facing the wall might be those who mainly use social media for news, engage mostly in gossip, and are threatened by the 'woke' world. They would angrily resist any suggestion that they need to examine their feelings and emotions, much less the knee jerk opinions that they are not even aware they project as defenses against self-reflection.

3. Current Perspectives on Plato

The book *The Immortality Key* (Muraresku 2020) discusses at length the potion (*kykeon*) used in the Eleusinian mysteries, a topic receiving much attention in popular culture of the Psychedelic Renaissance. But the Mysteries present only one event in Plato's life. Of far greater significance was the series of events surrounding the trial and death of his teacher Socrates.

Plato, as a young, educated Athenian aristocrat, aspired to the highest level of literary accomplishment for someone of his ilk, the honor attained by playwrights like Sophocles or Aeschylus. They achieved the highest honor Greek society could award by capturing a laurel wreath at the Olympics. Plato did in fact become the greatest stylist in the Greek language, but his interest in literal playwriting was diverted by his encounter with Socrates, whom he made the chief character in his dialogues. Although Plato eschewed formal playwriting, his early dialogues take the form of plays, even having quasi stage directions. Plato's portrayal of Socrates is vivid, reflecting his intense engagement with Socrates. Watching Socrates persecuted and executed must have been many times more intense than any psychedelic experience.

More important than any moment of mystical experience is Plato's warning of the necessity for long study and close companionship, something that merely taking a potion cannot achieve. The necessity of long attendance is evident in Plato's extensive thinking and writing. In contrast, participation in the Greater Mysteries of Eleusis was limited to one time, and the Mysteries only happened once each year. The Mysteries thus were infrequent and unrepeatable, unlike the practices of the contemporary denizens of the Psychedelic Renaissance Eleusinian ritual. Initiates only participated once in the ritual, and it was offered only every five years.

The narrow focus on the role of the putatively psychedelic potion *kykeon* in the ceremony of the mysteries of Demeter at Eleusis overlooks not only the nature of the rites themselves, but also their cultural significance. Even more unfortunately, it neglects the much greater significance of Plato's statement in *The Seventh Letter*, that the effort required to achieve sustained mystical understanding is long and demanding and not to be obtained merely from the most intense transcendent experience of a moment.

We know few details of the rites because initiates were sworn to secrecy, but some aspects were public.¹⁰ The myth of Demeter told how her daughter Persephone was kidnapped by Hades, the god of the underworld, and Demeter's subsequent efforts to rescue her. The core of the myth is death and rebirth, as they reflect the cycle of seasons. Demeter was the goddess of growing things. When the other gods would not help her get Persephone back from Hades, Demeter stopped all plants from growing. Initially that did not phase the other gods,



¹⁰ For an account of the public aspects of the Mysteries, see Appendix, item 3.

because they ate only the sublime food ambrosia. But when they realized that humans would die if there was no earthly food to eat, and then there would be no one to worship them, a compromise was reached with Hades: that Persephone was to spend six months with him (because she had eaten six pomegranate seeds while she was in the underworld), but then she would get to spend the next six months with her mother. Thus began the seasonal cycle of six months of winter when plants die, and six months of summer when they grow.



Because the potion used in the rites is believed to have been derived from the ergot fungus that grows prolifically on heads of rye and other grains (Wasson, Hoffman and Ruck 1998), it has been too readily compared with the ergot derivative that Albert Hoffman was working with when he accidentally discovered the psychotropic effect of LSD. Much is made of the fact that the symbol of the goddess Demeter, whose myth was central, was a sheaf of grain. The chemical similarity is incidental to the meaning or the rites that were characterized by the great poet Pindar as “dying before dying.” That is too readily interpreted as ‘ego death’ from the perspective of modern depth psychology.

For all the homage paid to the potion of Eleusis by the Psychedelic Renaissance, there is little awareness of the importance of the entire context of Eleusis in the current era. The Greater Mysteries of Eleusis were a sequence of arduous rites that lasted ten days. The infamous potion played only a role in one, albeit dramatic, moment of the encompassing, mythic drama.

In addition to the concentrated focus of mind cultivated by meditation, Plato stressed the importance of Dialectic for deepening the understanding intrinsic to sustained experience of mystical insight. The back and forth of Plato’s Dialectic requires that people give up their own opinions and biases and search for a mutually understood truth. What is more, effective Dialectic can only take place in a dedicated community setting.

Plato’s scorn for use of the Eleusinian potion outside of the ritual at Eleusis is evident in the *Symposium*. Alcibiades was a very competent general for Athens who went over to the Spartan side, but then managed somehow to regain position in Athenian politics. He is reputed to be perhaps the only person who managed to steal the Eleusinian potion, thereby violating the oath of secrecy required of all initiates. Plato portrays Alcibiades rudely ending the dinner and speeches of the *Symposium* by bursting in with an unruly, disruptive gang of inebriated revelers. Alcibiades’s profanity is like that of today’s neoshamans, who market junkets to gullible Westerners, who out of spiritual greed as tourists, partake ceremonies in an egregious, neocolonial cultural appropriation of indigenous rites.

4. From Neon Gods to Hopeful Visions

Much is bogged down today in fruitless efforts of neurophysiology, caught up in the greed of commercial pharma or the aggrandizement of false prophets touting their neon gods. The decade of the 1960’s happened long enough ago to yield some of its fruits, and the lights of some prophets have dimmed or sell

The yield of the 60s gives some hope, but it remains to be seen how that will compare with the work of Plato. That work, which has endured for two and a half millennia, is the broad foundation of Western intellectual attainment. It is a good starting point for innovating the creativity that is critical to insure the survival of humanity beyond the planetary crisis of the twenty-first century. We must search anew for true prophecies while eluding the blinking, blinding lure of neon gods.

In 1967 there were prophets on every corner in Haight-Ashbury. The pools of their eyes shown with psychedelic rainbows, though few pots of treasure could be found at their ends. It was easy and exciting to plunge into those pools and dive for creative pearls. A scant few found the pearls. Numerous others drowned in the unmanageable floods of their megalomaniac imaginations, because they could not hear the whispering sound of silence in the octopus's garden beneath the sea.

The task, as always, is to find the true prophets and harvest the rare pearls. Ken Kesey prophesied the collapse of the myth of mental illness, whose rubble we are still sorting out today. The personal computer was a jewel that came out of the psychedelic oyster. Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog* forecast the Web. We know these things so far. But there is still a way to go because the only test of prophecy is time. Two prescient books bear important witness:

- *From Prime Green: Remembering the Sixties*, by Robert Stone:

On returning to California from a long stay in London, at the time of the Attica Prison Riot in New York State, Stone remarked:

The California of our youth, whose very name was magic, had been transformed into an industrial landscape. The orchards that had not been good enough for us as we found them, that we had felt the need to illuminate and gild with the wine of astonishment and hang with acid lilacs, were orchards no more, they were Silicon Valley [filled with terrifying artificial intelligence.] ... The drugs which we believed so important a part of our liberation, the key to music, the doors of perception for an elite, became a mass youth phenomenon.... We used drugs in imitation of European decadents, but in the end we allowed drugs to be turned into a weapon against everything we believed in....Our expectations were too high, our demands excessive; things were harder than we expected....

In our time, we were clamorous and vain....We wanted it all; sometimes we confused self-destructiveness with virtue and talent, obliteration with ecstasy, heedlessness with courage.... Nothing is free, and we had to learn that at last. Every generation must—be it romantic or pragmatic, spiritually striving or materialistic as a copper penny.... We were the chief victims of our own mistakes. Measuring ourselves against the masters of the present, we regret nothing except our failure to prevail. (Stone 2007, 227-229)

- *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, by Fred Turner, notes that for many people the technologies of the Internet:

still seem to promise what the strobe lights and LSD of the Trips Festival once offered the hippies of the Haight: access to a vision of the patterns underlying the world, and by means of that vision, a way to join one's life to them and enter a global, harmonious community of mind.... And to [an] extent they have rendered their believers vulnerable to the material forces of the historical moment in which they live....

And the people bowed and
prayed
to the neon god they made,
And the sign flashed out its
warning.
In the words that it was
forming.
Then the sign said, "The
words of the prophets are
written on the subway walls,
in tenement halls, and
whispered in the sound of
silence." —Paul Simon

Yet, as the short life of the New communalist movement suggests... information technologies will never allow us to escape the demands of our bodies, our institutions, and the times in which we find ourselves....We remain confronted by the need to build egalitarian, ecologically sound communities. (Turner 2006, 262)

The primary inventor of the early video game Merlin¹¹ offered ideas for free to anyone who wanted them. The task, he cautioned, is to implement them. But before that, it is necessary to sort out the ideas that can be fruitfully implemented, like finding the true prophets. And then comes implementation, which is the truly difficult task.

Kesey dramatized the failure of healthcare for people with significant psychological issues. Attention to the failure was echoed and amplified by some people who had exceptional aspects of their minds brought to the fore by psychedelic experiences. Besides self-discovery, their experiences also provoked reflection on the role of culture in psychological health. This contemporary understanding mirrored the Platonic understanding of well-being. Reflections on the role of culture gave rise to the antipsychiatry movement.

Stanislav Grof was one of the first psychologists who grasped the importance of LSD. He was a member of a research group in Prague that was asked by Albert Hofmann's employer Sandoz to evaluate the clinical use of LSD. Grof early on characterized LSD most usefully as an "unspecific amplifier of mental processes." (Grof, *Realms of the Human Unconscious* 1976, 6) His group pioneered use of LSD to bring unconscious experience into awareness in psychotherapy. Ultimately at Esalen Institute, the crossroads of the counterculture, he and his wife Christina developed Holotropic Breathwork, a therapy that facilitates self-discovery in a non-directive group context.

Plato's dialog *Meno* demonstrates a process like Freud's psychoanalytic talk therapy, a process whose goal in Freudian terms is to make the unconscious conscious. For Plato the process is a dialectic that facilitates recollection of archetypes from the collective unconscious named by Carl Jung, which refers to something that is even more comprehensive than the unconscious named by Freud. Platonic recollection is connected to the even more ancient idea of transmigration. Alfred North Whitehead has conceived an advanced modern scientific framework for this deeper process. Whitehead develops Plato's cosmology to emphasize that bringing awareness to the 'unconscious' past by amplifying it is a fundamental basis for self-creation. Whitehead's philosophy also suggests how to understand creative innovation in a way that can help find fruitful prophecy amidst the welter of claims in the Psychedelic Renaissance. The heart of Whitehead's philosophy is the same as Plato's: the only sustainable experience of mystical understanding is born out of a long time of attendance and study. Otherwise, the mystical experience is transient.

5. Conclusion

Many prophets have trumpeted psychedelic visions, mistakenly thinking their visions are idiosyncratic to psychedelic substances. As Stanislav Grof points out, however, the substances are only amplifiers. We must differentiate substances from what they amplify just as we must distinguish a sound system from the music that issues forth. No one looks for a Beethoven fugue inside an organ, nor can one dissect Taylor Swift's brain as a substitute for attending a concert.

Unfortunately, the side effects of psychedelic substances usually draw unreflective attention, but they are basically perceptual amplifications. They may be prominent in the case of low-level dosages, or they may

¹¹ The game was invented by former NASA employee Bob Doyle, his wife Holly, and brother-in-law Wendl Thomis. Merlin is notable as one of the earliest and most popular handheld games, selling over 5 million units during its initial run, as well as one of the most long-lived, remaining popular throughout the 1980s. A version of the game was re-released in 2004 by the Milton Bradley Company.

appear at the early onset of a large dose that ultimately triggers an experience of mystical intensity. People tend to unreflectively identify these perceptual amplifications as essential features of their experiences and differentiate them accordingly. But there is a central mystical experience that transcends perceptual amplifications.

Neurological science analogously searches for physiological correlates while eschewing metaphysical questions. What the neurologically oriented think are important differences between substances are in fact differences between side effects that are prominent at the low level dosages many people ingest. The significant, central psychedelic experience is the same across all substances, as Grof suggested. The central experience is an amplification of one's psychic core. The amplification of one's senses and aesthetic perceptions is peripheral, involving mainly the shadows on the wall of the Cave.

Exceptional experiences provoked by various substances or circumstances may be steps on the journey of ascension that Plato describes in his writings, such as the *Symposium* and the *Republic*. The method of Grof's Holotropic Breathwork uses a combination of elements, group process in a safe setting, intensified breathing evocative music, and focused bodywork. The experience these can engender is followed by free drawing, discussed as a group process, which is an homage to Plato's requirement for long study. Holotropic Breathwork, thus undertaken, compares in purpose with Plato's method. But there are circumstances that do not involve any method *per se*. There are apparently spontaneous experiences. A fall from a great height may trigger the type of exceptional experience that gets called "near death" (NDE).¹²

A difficult mistake that can attend exceptional experiences is to think that one's thoughts associated with an experience manifest indubitable truth. But such specific thoughts are idiosyncratic. The only universal truth is the peak feeling of oneness that Plato calls *kolon*: the good, the beautiful. It is a feeling beyond interpretation. Nonetheless religions and cults have been founded on interpretations ancillary to the experience. Extended reflection, which Plato refers to as "long study," can dissuade difficult mistakes. What is more, it is also a mistake to believe dogmatically that the experience is due only to a particular set of practices, sacraments or the like. Alfred North Whitehead attests,

It is equally possible to arrive at this [mystical] conception of the world if we start from the fundamental notions of modern physics instead of ... from psychology and physiology. In fact by reason of my own studies in mathematics and mathematical physics, I did in fact arrive at my convictions in this way. (Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* 1925, 152)

Today's psychedelic renaissance advertises numerous programs that claim to train psychedelic and shamanic guides and focus on the use of substances. Putting a focus on substances overlooks Plato's requirement for long study and close attendance as a prelude for mystical understanding. What is more, most of the programs today operate in terms of psychology or physiology.

Whitehead's extensive reflection created a cosmology that advances Plato's by incorporating advanced modern science, going well beyond Aristotle's detail-oriented metaphysic. Whitehead offers a cosmology that illuminates Grof's and Plato's methods. In Whiteheadian terms, what is amplified is the event that is the actual, existent moment of self, that is always becoming and perishing. It is not the unchanging being (*ousia*) that Aristotle ossified in his attempt to systematize Plato. It is not contingent on the agency of a substance. It is the concrescence of relations intrinsic to the cosmos. It yields the mystical feeling that *all is one*. Prophecy is the province of lower levels of the Divided Line, but when the final spark is kindled,

¹² See Albert Heim's account of his fall in the Swiss Alps and subsequent studies of NDEs (Grof, *The Ultimate Journey* 2006, 145-174).

there is no need to prophesy, no need for neon gods. A blade of grass is a blade of grass, a grain of sand is a grain of sand, the sky is the sky, and light is the essence of the sky.

The conclusion of Whitehead's speech as President of the Mathematical Association of England in 1916 speaks to a result of his reflection. He stipulates that the essence of education is inspiration to Plato's ideals, justice, truth, beauty, integrity, etc. Plato, two and a half millennia ago, urged the study of mathematics as a way to understand these ideals, and seek comprehension of the mystical ultimate good (*kalon*), which makes reason possible. To the assembled teachers of mathematics Whitehead said,

The essence of education is that it be religious ['spiritual' in today's terms].... A religious education is an education which inculcates duty and reverence. Duty arises from our potential control over the course of events. Where attainable knowledge could have changed the issue, ignorance has the guilt of vice. And the foundation of reverence is this perception, that the present holds within itself the complete sum of existence, backwards and forwards, that whole amplitude of time, which is eternity.¹³ (Whitehead, *The Aims of Education* 1929, 14)

A prevalent psychedelic mistake is to worship amplifiers as tokens of truth. The most important use of psychedelic substances as amplifiers of the human mind is their help for philosophically provoking metaphysical awareness and for revealing one's psychology, one's life history. Use for either of these purposes can open one to mind beyond the brain. Amplifying awareness of my past opens me to the material that I must study and question in order to gain self-awareness. But that awareness is an experience that comes only after long study and close attendance. And then not only awareness of my own past, but the whole past of the world provides the possibility that I can learn who I am in the cosmos and how I am in relation to other humans and to all the other creatures and to all the natures of all the organisms that I am one in unison with. To achieve this awareness requires a long course of education in service of spirit.

¹³ In the *Timaeus* Plato describes time as "a moving image of eternity." (37d)

Appendix

1. The mystical idea and the beginnings of the American republic

Plato's *Republic* begins with a short, early dialog about the qualities of a just person. At greater length later, he added the rest of the *Republic*, which describes the characteristics and functions of a just state. Plato makes a comparison between the just person and the just state.

In the later, much longer part of the *Republic*, Plato envisages three basic classes of people: (1) farmers and artisans, (2) guardian-warriors who protect the state, and (3) rulers-philosophers who oversee the running of the state. Plato describes a structure of education with stages of mastery that are appropriate for the function of each type of citizen in the state. This structure of education is designed to mirror the stages of understanding Plato variously represents in his epistemology. Some interpreters criticize Plato's distinction of classes as presenting an elitist picture, influenced by Athens's recent defeat by Sparta, but Plato's more important notion is that the balance of elements within a community reflects that justice is a kind of harmony. In the ideal state that harmony involves balancing "diametrically opposed dispositions, aggressive energy of the spirit and firm restraint." (Friedlander 1969, 113) This is a somewhat theoretical matter as Plato presents it in the *Republic*, but today's understanding of genetics renders it vivid. If we attempt to genetically optimize human nature, we may discover that "many of the most valued qualities are genetically linked to more obsolete destructive ones. Cooperative towards groupmates might be coupled with aggressivity toward strangers, creativeness with a desire to own and dominate, athlete zeal with a tendency to violent response, and so on. (Wilson 1975, 575)

Plato's apparent hierarchy of classes is an attempt to balance tendencies by assigning functions of the state to different groups. His hierarchical design mirrors his idea in the Divided Line (which is discussed in item 3 of this appendix) of stages on a journey to mystical understanding. His hierarchy of understanding parallels Plato's epistemology of the nature of things.

It is a mistake to view Plato's hierarchy of classes through a modern lens informed by political sociology. The bias of modern culture not only has created the terminology of 'lower classes' but has also gazed on them pejoratively. Plato's Athenian culture was informed not only by Homer's epics of warrior nobility but also by the lyrics of Hesiod, who reflected the old feudal civilization that was largely rooted in the soil of Greece:

Country life was not yet synonymous with intellectual underdevelopment; it was not yet measured by an urban standard. 'Peasant' had not come to mean 'uncultured.' At that time even the cities (especially those of mainland Greece) were principally country-towns, and so in large part they remained. There was in the countryside a steady growth of native morality, and thought, and faith, a crop as constant as the grass and grain which every field produced, and as truly native as the soil. (Jaeger, W. Highet, G. tr. 1945, 59-60)

Early American culture was not unlike the one that gave birth to Plato. The founders of this country were thoroughly conversant with Plato's ideas and the poetry of Homer and Hesiod. Their design of the United States evidenced significant attempts to embody important Platonic ideals of balance and harmony.

The influence of Plato's idea that there is a fundamental synergy between the wellbeing of a citizen and the community where the citizen dwells is echoed in one of the essential premises of Holotropic Breathwork that a community setting facilitates people's process of self-exploration. Among the founders of the United States there was a hope that a properly structured democracy was a way to reflect a kind of divine unity that mirrored mystical oneness.

That divine ideal may be synchronistic with an echo of Plato in the design on the back of the dollar bill, which was first suggested by a committee of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams. Above the pyramid is the Eye of Providence, often associated with the idea of divine guidance and protection. "Annuit Coeptis" above the pyramid translates to "God has favored our endeavors."

"Novus Ordo Seclorum" below the pyramid, which translates to "New Order of the Ages" or "New World Order." It signifies the beginning of a new era for the United States, a rebirth in the face of an old order that governed the world.

In the *Symposium*, the final vision is the goal of Plato's method, which Plotinus achieved. One of the essential ideas of Holotropic Breathwork is that a community setting facilitates people's process of self-exploration. Among the founders of the United States there was a hope that a properly structured democracy was a way to reflect a divine unity that mirrored mystical oneness.

2. The Divided Line

The Divided Line can be represented by a technical diagram that portrays ascending levels of human function and corresponding kinds of knowledge. The diagram shows a vertical line divided unevenly overall and then divided again in its lower and upper sections in the same uneven proportions as the overall line. The line represents a sort of ladder that one must climb to achieve greater and greater understanding. Plato says the lower section of the line compares to perception by the eye, and the upper section to perception by the mind. The lower sections of the line represent the aesthetic perception of things via the five senses and moral perception of rules of conduct. Both divisions in the lower section involve the changing realm of experience that Plato calls the domain of becoming and opinion.

The things and the behaviors in the lower section seem to take place in what we commonly think of as space and time. Our modern concepts of space and time originated in the theories of Descartes and Newton. To understand this diagram, it is important to realize that our modern ideas about space and time are quite different from those of Plato's ancient Greek culture. That culture did not see the way we do and interpret the objects of sensation as made up of inert matter, atoms and molecules. Rather, the objects of sensation in the ancient Greek world had some kind of animation, not only the animation of beasts and insects, but also the less obvious animation of wind and river, of trees and grasses, and the even more subtle animation of rocks and mountains.

Animism can still be seen in the shamanic understanding of indigenous peoples today, where, for example, even a boat's outboard that we think of as a mere mechanical device has spirit.¹⁴ This kind of understanding is literal, and it compares, in an ironically opposite way, to early science's thinking of matter as lifeless, i.e., manifesting deadness. 'Deadness' is opposite to shamanism's 'spirit,' but shamanism and Cartesian-Newtonian science both are the same in thinking literally about the nature of things, and so both belong on the lower level of Plato's Divided Line.

The upper level of the Divided Line is the realm of reason that grasps principles of behavior, grammar, logic, mathematics, and other concepts discerned by thinking. Such principles give rise to the values that underlie moral behaviors, such as speaking truthfully, being trustworthy, behaving with integrity, etc. Principles in this realm also govern the logic that yields rules for coherent thinking. This upper level of the Divided Line points beyond literal thinking to indicating insight into metaphor. The ancient Greek

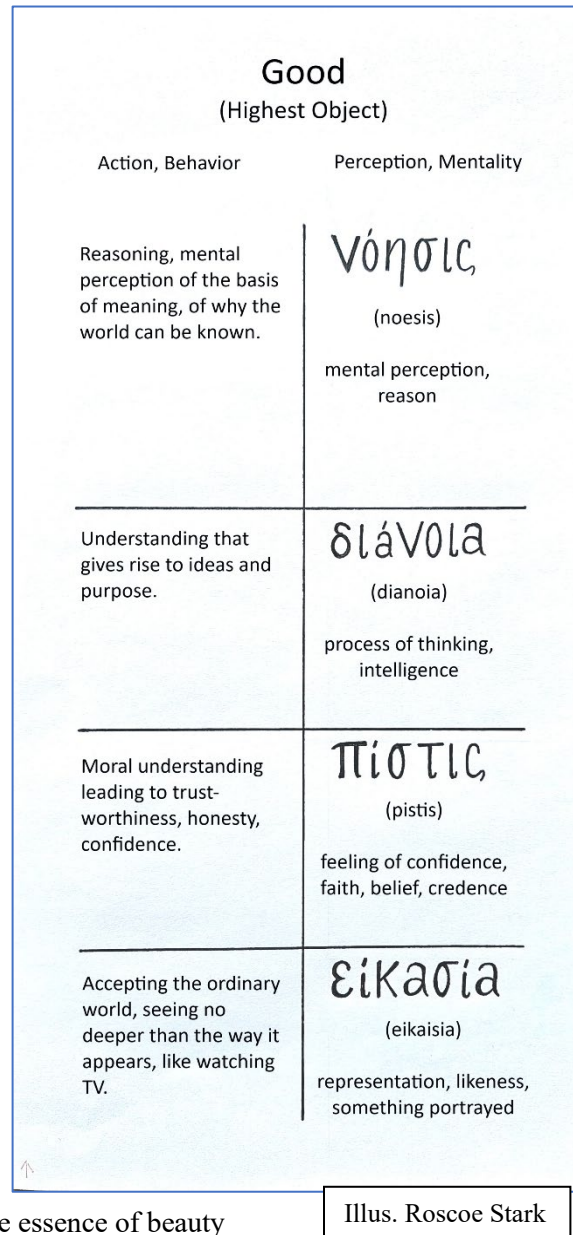
¹⁴ Michael Harner, lecturing in a public workshop on shamanism, testified about his surprise during his apprenticeship to an Amazonian shaman. He had been receiving introductions to trees, animals, etc. in previous days. On a following day, the shaman told him, "Now we will do the spirit of the outboard motor."

world inherited the shamanic notion that everything manifests ‘spirit,’ and Plato also thought in a way that was metaphorical rather than literal. It is notable that the most advanced science of today has progressed beyond Cartesian-Newtonianism to a place that sees matter as drops (quanta) of activity, which is a metaphorical interpretation of the liveliness of ‘spirit;’ rather than seeing matter as dead.

Knowledge at a higher level than the ordinary world of appearances, sensations, and true beliefs involves abstract concepts. A child may believe that it is important to tell the truth, but it takes a more developed moral sense to understand the abstract concept of justice. Plato thought of justice and similar abstract notions as existing in the realm of ideals that only reason can access, as sorts of models mind can grasp that have an existence similar to numbers or the ‘law’ of gravity. One can appreciate such things even though one cannot see them. A child may learn to count first by looking at her or his fingers. As the child progresses in school, she or he can move from addition to multiplication, then perhaps algebra and calculus and geometric ideas. Thus, a person climbs the ladder into Plato’s ‘intelligible world.’ As one continues up this ladder, they begin to encounter questions such as why is there mathematics and even why is there a world? These sorts of questions, Plato thought, are the most important concern of philosophy.

Plato claimed, based on his most profound experiences, that even these very abstract questions do not address ultimate understanding. The answers to them cannot be conceived as the kind of knowledge that is taught in school. He says, Those who hold this ... view [that intelligence or knowledge is the source of enlightenment] are not able to point out what knowledge it is but are finally compelled to say that it is the knowledge of the good." (505b) Their argument therefore is circular, and actually implies that the Good (*Kalon*) is not a form of knowledge or intellect, but something that can only be grasped through a transcendent experience. It is something beyond anything that can be described as a form of knowing. Even when sighted, it “remains invisible.” (Friedlander 1969, 115)

If one has progressed by meditation and study up the levels of the Divided Line, it is possible that one may experience the ultimate mystical vision of the Good (*Kalon*), which illuminates understanding in an analogy to the way the Sun illuminates the ordinary world. Plato further says (509b) that the Good is "beyond essence and existence," i.e., it is not a form of being, but is “being beyond being.” (Friedlander 1969, 115) It lies beyond the understanding that can be attained even by dialectical reasoning about questions that have intellectual answers. Ultimately a wondrous vision of the essence of beauty (*phusin kalon*) lies beyond any description. It is as if, having climbed to the highest rung of the ladder, one must ultimately make a leap into some great void or nothingness that lies beyond any characterization, much like Zen Buddhism would claim. Having attained this insight, the



person who has struggled up out of the shadows of the Cave and seen the light of ultimate understanding is shown by that light that it is necessary to return down to the Cave to teach those still there the possibility of struggling up and out to achieve for themselves the vision of the Good and the Beautiful.

We can compare Whitehead and Plato in terms of Grof's notion of psychedelic amplification. The first level of Plato's Divided Line displays the apparently solid ordinary world. In Whitehead's terms, the ordinary world is a representation of things just past. The second level amplifies feelings of relatedness to the world at large, especially moral feelings. The fundamental nature of mentality is amplified on the third, and on the fourth penultimately are amplified Plato's ideals, justice, truth, beauty, integrity, etc.,¹⁵ that are the foundation of Mind. At its most most profound, amplification can intensify to a comprehension of ultimate good (*kalon*), and inspired with awe, realize that Mind is related wholistically to all that exists.

3. Eleusis

There were lesser and greater mysteries of Eleusis.¹⁶ Cicero said of the Greater Mysteries:

Among the many excellent and indeed divine institutions which your Athens has brought forth and contributed to human life, none, in my opinion, is better than those mysteries. For by their means we have been brought out of our barbarous and savage mode of life and educated and refined to a state of civilization; and as the rites are called "initiations," so in very truth we have learned from them the beginnings of life, and have gained the power not only to live happily, but also to die with a better hope. (Cicero n.d., II, xiv, 36)

The Greater Mysteries appear to have involved the use of the *kykeon*. They occurred during Boedromion – the third month of the Attic calendar, falling in late summer around September or October – and lasted ten days. The first act (on the 14th of Boedromion) was the bringing of the sacred objects from Eleusis to the Eleusinion, a temple at the base of the Acropolis of Athens. On the 15th of Boedromion, a day called the Gathering (*Agyrmos*), the priests (*hierophantes*, those who show the sacred ones) declared the start of the rites (*prorrhesis*), and carried out the sacrifice (*hieréia deúro*, hither the victims). The initiates (*halade mystai*) started out in Athens on 16th Boedromion with the celebrants washing themselves in the sea at Phaleron.

On the 17th, the participants began the *Epidauria*, a festival for Asklepios named after his main sanctuary at Epidauros. This "festival within a festival" celebrated the healer's arrival at Athens with his daughter Hygiea, and consisted of a procession leading to the Eleusinion, during which the mystai apparently stayed at home, a great sacrifice, and an all-night feast (*pannykhís*). The procession to Eleusis began at Kerameikos (the Athenian cemetery) on the 18th, and from there the people walked to Eleusis, along the Sacred Way (*Ἱερὰ Ὀδός*, *Hierá Hodós*), swinging branches called *bacchoi*. At a certain spot along the way, they shouted obscenities in commemoration of Iambe (or Baubo), an old woman who, by cracking dirty jokes, had made Demeter smile as she mourned the loss of her daughter. The procession also

¹⁵ This short list does hardly any justice to all that Plato tried to explain about the fundamental nature of things, and this essay does even less justice to his investigation of the vast cosmos.

¹⁶ The description here of the Mysteries is adapted from "Eleusinian Mysteries" - Wikipedia (anonymous n.d.) The website reports more extensive details, plus illustrations, mythology, personae, and entheogenic theories. The description above also includes information from *The Road to Eleusis* (Wasson, Hoffman and Ruck 1998).

shouted "*Íakch', O Íakche!*", possibly an epithet for Dionysus, or a separate deity Iacchus, son of Persephone or Demeter.

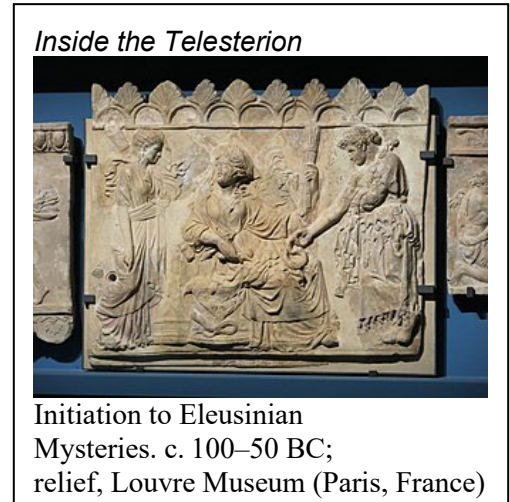
Upon reaching Eleusis, there was an all-night vigil (*Pannychis*) ... perhaps commemorating Demeter's search for Persephone. At some point, initiates had a special drink (kykeon), of barley and pennyroyal, which has led to speculation about its chemicals perhaps having psychotropic effects from ergot (a fungus that grows on barley, containing psychedelic alkaloids similar to LSD). Discovery of fragments of ergot in a temple dedicated to the two Eleusinian goddesses excavated at the Mas Castellar site (Girona, Spain) provided legitimacy for this theory. Ergot fragments were found inside a vase and within the dental calculus of a 25-year-old man, providing evidence of ergot being consumed. This finding seems to support the hypothesis of ergot as an ingredient of the Eleusinian kykeon.

On the 19th of Boedromion, initiates entered a great hall called Telesterion; in the center stood the Palace (Anaktoron), built of ruins dating back to the Mycenaean Age, which only the hierophants could enter, where sacred objects were stored. Before mystai could enter the Telesterion, they would recite, "I have fasted, I have drunk the kykeon, I have taken from the kiste (box) and after working it have put it back in the calathus (open basket).

It is widely supposed that the rites inside the Telesterion comprised three elements:

- *dromena* (things done), a dramatic reenactment of the Demeter/Persephone myth,
- *deiknumena* (things shown), a display of sacred objects, in which the hierophant played an essential role,
- *legomena* (things said), commentaries that accompanied the *deiknumena*

Combined, these three elements were known as the *aporrheta* (unrepeatable); the penalty for divulging them was death.



Athenagoras of Athens, Cicero, and other ancient writers cite that it was for this crime (among others) that Diagoras was condemned to death in Athens; the tragic playwright Aeschylus was allegedly tried for revealing secrets of the mysteries in some of his plays, but was acquitted. The ban on divulging the core ritual of the mysteries was thus absolute, which is probably why almost nothing is known about what transpired there.

Climax

As to the climax of the mysteries, there are two modern theories.

Some hold that the priests were the ones to reveal the visions of the holy night, consisting of a fire that represented the possibility of life after death, and various sacred objects. Others hold this explanation to be insufficient to account for the power and longevity of the mysteries, and that the experiences must have been internal and mediated by a powerful psychoactive ingredient contained in the *kykeon* drink.

Following this part of the Mysteries came the all-night feast *Pannychis* accompanied by dancing and merriment. This portion of the festivities was open to the public. The dances took place in the Rharian Field, rumored to be the first spot where grain grew. A bull sacrifice also took place late that night or

early the next morning. That day (22nd Boedromion), the initiates honored the dead by pouring libations from special vessels.

On the 23rd of Boedromion, the mysteries ended, and everyone returned home.

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