'How to Change Your Mind': Is there room for psychedelics in the modern world?

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By Glenn Altschuler

In 2009, David Nutt, a professor at the University of Bristol and chair of Britain’s Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, declared that using LSD or Ecstasy was “of course” less harmful than consuming alcohol or riding a horse.

When Mr. Nutt repeated this claim on breakfast television, the British home secretary sacked him.

According to Michael Pollan, Mr. Nutt is one of several research scientists and underground therapists in Britain and the United States who are busting myths about “psychedelic” drugs — and discovering how the altered states of consciousness these substances induce enhance our understanding of the brain, the self and our connection to the natural world.

In “How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence,” Mr. Pollan reviews empirical studies about LSD and psilocybin (the active ingredient in “magic mushrooms”) in the 1940s, ‘50s and ‘60s; the backlash against psychedelics that resulted in the Controlled Substances Act of 1970, which outlawed psychedelics; and recent studies assessing the impact of psilocybin on “healthy normals,” addicts and terminal cancer patients. Mr. Pollan also provides an intimate account of his three psychedelic trips.

A regular contributor to The New York Times Magazine and the author of five best-sellers, Mr. Pollan is no stranger to controversy.

In “The Omnivore’s Dilemma” (2006), for example, he blasted agri-business and the U.S. Department of Agriculture for policies and practices that wreak havoc with Americans’ diet, nutrition and well-being. His new book is certain to provoke discussion, debate and denunciation.
Mr. Pollan readily acknowledges the challenges inherent in designing “controlled experiments” to measure the risks and rewards of psychedelic drugs.

The advice of therapists administering the drugs about a “major experience” that may well involve the disintegration of the self, valuable insights about the meaning of life and existence, and/or transient feelings of isolation and terror, he indicates, makes a “certain expectancy” unavoidable.

Mr. Pollan also emphasizes that after-the-fact descriptions of trips “always sound a little thin,” banal and platitudinous. A “coherent narrative highlighting themes begun as a jumble of disjointed images and shards of sense,” he recognizes, does “violence” to the experience. Even more difficult, it seems, is the challenge of weighing the journey’s enduring effect on, say, creativity and ego. Individuals, of course, can and do put drug-induced perceptions in a box “and throw it away, never to dwell on it again.”

All that said, Mr. Pollan makes a compelling case for the potential value of psychedelic experiences. While he was “be-mushroomed,” he tells us, the “doors and windows of perception opened wide.”

Freed “from the tyranny of the ego, with its maddeningly reflexive reactions and its pinched conceptions of self-interest,” he — and many, many individuals he interviewed — set aside fears, anxieties and inhibitions; felt more connected to other people and their surroundings; less constrained by time and space; more spiritual, joyous, blessed and loving.

To be sure, Mr. Pollan emphasizes, the brain is very good at observing, testing and making predictions about “reality.” He insists, however, that we pay a price — in constrained cognition, a dominant ego, and a narrowed consciousness — for “the achievement of order and selfhood.”

Mr. Pollan fervently believes that by establishing new pathways in the brain, psychedelics can help the well and the unwell. Recent “trials” indicate clinically significant emotional and behavioral gains for addicts, terminally ill patients and chronically depressed individuals.

However, Mr. Pollan “does not exactly” support legalization. Sooner or later, he indicates, most users experience trips “for which ‘bad’ is too pallid a modifier.” He suggests that “someone with the training and experience” to create a safe setting, “hold the space” and help make sense of the experience should always be present.

At times, Mr. Pollan is prone to exaggerated claims about the impact of psychedelics on individuals and American society.

He concludes, reasonably, that we “have plenty of clues, and more now than before the renaissance of psychedelic science, but we remain a long way from understanding exactly what happens to consciousness when we alter it, either with a molecule or with medication.”
These “crude hieroglyphs of psychedelic thought,” he then adds, strongly suggest that we are “standing on the edge of a wide-open frontier, squinting to make out something wondrous” about a mind that is vaster and a world more alive than we have ever imagined.

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