

9

Spirituality

Will not a tiny speck very close to our vision blot out the glory of the world, and leave only a margin by which we see the blot? I know no speck so troublesome as self.

George Eliot, *Middlemarch*.

9.1 Introduction

My conclusion that the Comforting Delusion Objection fails depends on two premises: (i) that the epistemic risks of psychedelic therapy, given naturalism, are fairly small, and (ii) that its epistemic benefits, given naturalism, are fairly large. Conjointly, these refute a central assumption underlying the Objection: that the overall epistemic status of psychedelic therapy, given naturalism, is poor. The arguments of Chapter 8 conclude my case for these two premises, so the bulk of our substantive work is done.

However, there is one final matter to address. My goal is not merely to defend psychedelic therapy against naturalistic objections. It is also, more positively, to offer a conceptual framework for thinking about psychedelics' beneficial effects—a framework consistent with naturalism, but richer than narrowly 'psychotomimetic' or 'hallucinogenic' conceptions. As such, I said in Chapter 2 that in the course of answering the Comforting Delusion Objection I would also be attempting to naturalise the *Entheogenic Conception* of psychedelics. And the *Entheogenic Conception*, as I have defined it, sees psychedelics as agents not only of epistemic benefit but also of authentic *spiritual* experience and transformation. This is the final matter to be addressed: to show how a view of psychedelics as spirituality promoting agents can be understood and defended within a naturalistic framework.

There are at least two reasons why the putatively spiritual aspects of psychedelic experience are important for a natural philosophy of psychedelics. The first is that these aspects seem of overriding importance to many psychedelic subjects, perhaps even more so than epistemic aspects. The second reason is that the putatively spiritual aspects seem especially resistant to naturalisation, perhaps even more so than epistemic aspects. The claim that psychedelics can have epistemic benefits consistent with naturalism may seem, at most, highly implausible (albeit perhaps less so in light of Chapter 8). But the claim that psychedelics can have *spiritual* benefits consistent with naturalism is liable to seem downright incoherent. Surely, one might think, this claim is self-contradictory. Surely spirituality and naturalism are opposed by

definition, naturalism being nothing more than the denial of the non-natural and the supernatural—of which *spirits* and *the spiritual* would seem to be paradigmatic examples.

Recently, however, several philosophers have argued that this apparent inconsistency is *merely* apparent: that the term ‘spiritual’ does not refer only to practices or experiences that involve non-naturalistic ideations. They contend that there are practices and experiences that can legitimately be called ‘spiritual’, but do not depend on any such ideations. These philosophers have been arguing, in other words, for the possibility of a *naturalised spirituality*. In this chapter, I argue that psychedelic evidence supports their contention: psychedelic research shows that there are genuine forms of spirituality that do not rely on non-naturalistic metaphysics.

I have made this argument at greater length elsewhere (Letheby 2017). Here I will simply outline briefly the psychedelic case for a naturalised spirituality. I begin, in section 9.2, by reviewing some recent philosophical work on naturalistic spirituality. Despite differences in detail, certain common themes emerge from this research. One of these is the idea that spirituality has to do with connection, aspiration, and asking the Big Questions. Another is that these are all forms of ‘breaking through the narrow walls of the ego’ (Stone 2012, p. 492).

In section 9.3, I argue that psychedelic research provides converging evidence for these claims. This evidence consists of three observations. First, transformative psychedelic experiences that people are moved to call ‘spiritual’ do not uniformly feature non-naturalistic metaphysical apprehensions. Second, such experiences typically do feature feelings of connection and aspiration, and attention to the Big Questions. Third, according to the account developed in this book, these all result primarily from breaking through the narrow walls of the ego. The concept of *unselfing*, introduced by the philosopher Iris Murdoch (1970), encapsulates the psychological processes that are at the heart of psychedelic spirituality, and that require, in themselves, no adherence to non-naturalistic metaphysics (cf. Kähönen 2020).

It is worth noting that there is considerable overlap between the psychological mechanisms underlying the epistemic benefits reviewed in Chapter 8 and those underlying the spiritual benefits that are the topic of the present chapter. Most obviously, the unbinding of the predictive self-model is central to both. However, the claim that such disruption can have epistemic benefits, and the claim that it can give rise to authentically spiritual experiences, are conceptually distinct and hence must be justified by different arguments.

9.2 Naturalising spirituality

The naturalising programme in philosophy attempts to show that various phenomena central to human life, such as moral truth, mental representation, and free will, are unmysterious parts of the natural world investigated and described by the sciences. Perhaps nothing seems a less promising target for this programme than

spirituality. Of course, there is no problem in showing that the sorts of practices and experiences that people *call* 'spiritual' are wholly natural phenomena. But the idea that there might be practices that (i) can accurately be called 'spiritual', and that (ii) can be practised *sincerely* by those committed to naturalism and to intellectual honesty (Metzinger 2013a) sounds absurd. Surely the sincere practice of spirituality, by definition, requires belief in the spiritual—as opposed, metaphysically, to the natural.

Recently, however, increasing numbers of people have been self-identifying as 'spiritual but not religious' (Fuller 2001), demonstrating that the term 'spiritual' has acquired certain specific connotations. In particular, it seems often to connote an orientation that favours direct, experiential, and practical approaches to questions of meaning, purpose, and transcendence, in contradistinction to the mere dogma or belief frequently taken to characterise institutional religion. Given its connotations of experiential inquiry and practical transformation as opposed to blind faith and empty ritual, this raises the question whether spirituality really does require commitment to non-naturalistic metaphysical claims.

Several philosophers and philosophically inclined thinkers have answered in the negative. For example, Ursula Goodenough (1998, 2001) suggests that spirituality can involve reflective contemplation of nature, including scientific descriptions thereof, and of philosophical mysteries such as why there is something rather than nothing. Such contemplation involves expanding one's perspective beyond the cares and concerns of the individual self, and can evoke responses of wonder, awe, appreciation, and existential gratitude. However, it clearly does not depend on non-naturalistic metaphysical beliefs. Similarly, Robert Solomon (2002) holds that spirituality centrally involves developing broader perspectives by expanding attention beyond self-related concerns. Spirituality, for Solomon, also involves a sense of reverence and love of life, as well as feelings of existential gratitude grounded in an appreciation of the contingency of our own lives. Meanwhile, Sam Harris (2014), based in part on his own experiences practising Tibetan Buddhist Dzogchen meditation, reserves the term 'spirituality' for the gaining, and deepening, of direct experiential insight into the non-existence of the self. As we have seen, influential arguments for the no-self theory face considerable challenges. Nonetheless, this putative insight is clearly consistent with naturalism.

In an important review, Jerome Stone synthesises these and several other accounts of naturalistic spirituality, and extracts the following common core:

We are spiritual, first, when our sense of connection is enlarged. Second, we are spiritual when we aspire to greater things, when we attempt to realize our ideals. Finally, we are spiritual when we ask the big questions. Note that these three—connection, aspiration, and reflection on profound questions—are all forms of enlarging our selves, of breaking through the narrow walls of the ego.

(Stone 2012, p. 492).

Thinkers such as Goodenough, Solomon, and Harris, and others such as Owen Flanagan (2007) argue that the sincere practice of spirituality is compatible with a naturalistic worldview. They arrive at this conclusion by various routes: analysis of the concept of spirituality, reflective engagement in spiritual practices, and so forth. The renaissance of psychedelic research offers a golden opportunity for a distinctive approach: a *neuropsychological* inquiry into naturalised spirituality (Letheby 2017). By ‘neuropsychological’, I do not mean ‘focused exclusively on brain scans and molecular pharmacology’. As outlined in Chapter 2, I simply mean an account that begins with the phenomena, and grounds philosophical conclusions in knowledge from the multidisciplinary mind and brain sciences—noting that an integrative psychedelic neuroscience needs qualitative research and psychometric data just as much as neuroimaging and neuropsychology.

The golden opportunity arises from the fact that psychedelics reliably induce experiences that subjects feel moved to describe as ‘spiritual’—even, in some cases, with no prior interest in or inclination towards spirituality (e.g., Fadiman 2005, Pollan 2018). This suggests that these experiences are *paradigmatically* spiritual: they consistently evoke the application of that term even by those with quite divergent beliefs about the subject. As such, the significance of the recent wave of psychedelic neuroscience is this: for the first time ever, scientists are in a position to safely, reliably, and repeatedly induce paradigmatically spiritual experiences in the laboratory (including the neuroimaging scanner) among diverse populations with differing prior beliefs and attitudes concerning spirituality. This gives us unprecedented access to high-quality evidence concerning the nature, causes, and consequences of paradigmatically spiritual experiences—evidence that is directly relevant to the question whether spirituality can be naturalised.

When we examine the evidence that has been gathered so far, we find a remarkable degree of convergence with the conclusions of philosophical inquiries. The findings from psychedelic research sit comfortably with the claim that we are spiritual ‘when our sense of connection is enlarged ... when we aspire to greater things ... [and] when we ask the big questions,’ and with the idea that connection, aspiration, and reflection on big questions are all ways of ‘breaking through the narrow walls of the ego’ (Stone 2012, p. 492). Therefore, these findings also sit comfortably with the claim that authentic forms of naturalistic spirituality exist, because fostering such connection, aspiration, and reflection (by disrupting the default functioning of the self-model) does not require non-naturalistic metaphysical ideations. Let us now revisit some of these findings in light of philosophical concerns about naturalising spirituality.

9.3 Spirituality as unselfing

Reflecting on a psilocybin experience that we have encountered in earlier chapters, Michael Pollan writes:

I could easily confirm the ‘fusion of [my] personal self into a larger whole’, as well as the ‘feeling that [I] experienced something profoundly sacred and holy’ and ‘of being at a spiritual height’ and even the ‘experience of unity with ultimate reality’. Yes, yes, yes, and yes—*provided, that is, my endorsement of those loaded adjectives doesn’t imply any belief in a supernatural reality* . . . something novel and profound had happened to me—something I am prepared to call spiritual, though only with an asterisk. I guess I’ve always assumed that spirituality implies a belief or faith I’ve never shared and from which it supposedly flows. But now I wondered, is this always or necessarily the case?

(2018, p. 284; my emphasis).

Here we find a fact of obvious significance for the current inquiry: that a psilocybin experience led a sceptically minded avowed naturalist to question, for the first time, whether spirituality necessarily requires ‘belief’ or ‘faith’. What novel and profound episode led such a person to question his lifelong assumptions about the nature and entailments of spirituality? What kind of experience moved him to apply the term ‘spiritual’ (even if only ‘with an asterisk’) *despite* not tempting him to any belief in a supernatural reality?

Unsurprisingly, it was an experience of breaking through the narrow walls of the ego and feeling connected to something larger: in this case, the sounds of a Bach cello suite in which Pollan’s altered consciousness sensed ‘nothing less than the stream of human consciousness, something in which one might glean the very meaning of life and . . . read life’s last chapter.’ This experience involved reflections, of a highly specific sort, on Big Questions, which had ‘the unmistakable effect of reconciling [Pollan] to death’ (Pollan 2018, pp. 268–269).

The terms ‘spiritual’ and ‘mystical’ are not precisely synonymous, of course. However, of the many ‘varieties of psychedelic experience’ (Masters and Houston 1966), subjects tend, unsurprisingly, to regard the mystical-type experience as spiritual. Pollan’s report provides one example of this. Another comes from the seminal study by Griffiths et al. (2008) in which healthy subjects received high-dose psilocybin. Subjects’ willingness to count the experience among the five most ‘spiritually significant’ of their lives correlated with ratings of mystical-type experience, but not with other psychometric measures, such as ratings of the overall intensity of the experience. Given this relationship, some of the conclusions I drew earlier in this book about mystical-type experiences are directly relevant to psychedelic spirituality and its compatibility or otherwise with a naturalistic worldview.

Specifically: given the relationship between mystical-type experience and attributions of spiritual significance, the account of psychedelic therapy developed in this book supports the contention that spirituality can be naturalised. As we have seen, some mystical-type experiences feature non-naturalistic metaphysical epiphanies, while others do not. The common denominator, and the main factor that gives these experiences their transformative power, is the unbinding of the predictive self-model

and the consequent liberation of attention from regulation and constraint by that model. What results, under conducive circumstances, is psychological insight, including the accessing of new, broader perspectives; seeing one's life within a wider context; emotional breakthroughs; and profound existential feelings of acceptance, embodiment, wonder, awe, and *connectedness*. We have seen that transformative psychedelic experiences often involve experiences of connection to something larger—the first of Stone's three pillars—and that many of these are independent of non-naturalistic metaphysics. Subjects report feelings of connectedness to their own minds, bodies, and emotions, to their values, to other people, to the biosphere and the cosmos at large. (And, in *some* cases, to a divine Reality, cosmic consciousness, or transcendent metaphysical principle.)

Another thing that often results, as Benny Shanon (2001, 2002) has pointed out, is philosophical reflection—reflection on the Big Questions. Irrespective of any prior interest or education in philosophy, many psychedelic subjects spontaneously begin exploring distinctively philosophical questions, and espousing recognisably philosophical views—about morality, the nature of consciousness and knowledge, the human condition, and so forth. The REBUS ('RELaxed Beliefs Under pSychedelics') model of Carhart-Harris and Friston (2019) provides an attractive explanation of this phenomenon. Philosophy and psychedelic experience both centrally involve exposing and scrutinising our most fundamental, usually unexamined, beliefs about self and world, rendering our foundational assumptions opaque, visible, and therefore dubitable. A key difference, of course, is that in modern academic philosophy this occurs in the medium of discursive rational reflection, whereas under psychedelics it occurs in the medium of our phenomenal models of reality (cf. Langlitz 2016). Here is how one patient described this experience after receiving psilocybin-assisted treatment for tobacco addiction:

It was all about searching for answers to questions that are age-old. Maybe we have the answer to some of it, maybe we'll never have the answer to it. But none of it had to do with addiction to cigarettes. It all had to do with stretching space and time, and asking questions like, 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' And, 'What happened before the Big Bang?' ... All those things that had nothing, absolutely nothing—at least in the conscious thinking of it—with stopping smoking ... every time I think of a cigarette, it brings me back to the three sessions of the psilocybin trip, where you're trying to ask questions that there may not be answers to. So, that's more fun than smoking!

(Noorani et al. 2018, p. 760).

This phenomenon constitutes another point of convergence between psychedelic use and mindfulness meditation. Here is the American Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön on the latter:

The path is a sense of wonder, becoming a two- or three-year-old child again, wanting to know all the unknowable things, beginning to question everything. We know we're never really going to find the answers, because these kinds of questions come from having a hunger and a passion for life—they have nothing to do with resolving anything or tying it all up into a neat little package. This kind of questioning is the journey itself. The fruition lies in beginning to realize our kinship with all humanity.

(Chödrön 1996, p. 11).

Stone's second pillar of spirituality is aspiration to greater things and the attempt to realise our ideals. Of the three, this is the one on which we have spent the least time in this book, but it sometimes emerges under the guise of psychological insight, when subjects report having epiphanies or realisations about their own values, priorities, and what matters to them. Sometimes this is described in terms of remembering, or reconnecting with, earlier versions of themselves, whose values are perceived as superior:

Participant 410 reflected,

Did I learn anything new? Have I done anything totally different than I ever did before? No! But I'm sort of going back into my ... earlier life when I probably was a better person, to be honest with you.

Similarly, Participant 427 remarked,

I don't know if I really *learned*—it was more like letting back in stuff that I had blocked out? ... I don't think I changed my values, just remembered more of them. Or just remembered to honour them more, or ... *allow* them more.

(Noorani et al. 2018, p. 759).

The idea that psychedelic experiences can help subjects to (re-)connect with their values and aspirations is relevant to recent suggestions that psychedelics might be viable agents of *moral bioenhancement*—that, suitably used, they might constitute effective biotechnologies for improving individuals' moral character (Earp 2018; cf. Tennison 2012, Ahlskog 2017). It is also consistent with the finding that healthy subjects who undergo transformative psychedelic experiences report lasting increases in altruistic and prosocial behaviour—increases verified by community observers (Griffiths et al. 2006, 2008, 2011). At least part of the mechanism here may be an oft-described aspect of psychedelic experience that I, with my focus on epistemological issues, have under-emphasised: the experience of universal or boundless love. We encountered one patient's description of this experience earlier, in chapter 3. This description speaks directly to questions about naturalising the aspects of spiritual experience that sometimes evoke religious interpretations:

Just overcome with love and all the love that I have for my family and my friends. I felt that it was coming from them; also I felt that I was bathed in it. And if I were religious it definitely would have been a religious experience, I would have said bathed in God's love. And I don't think English really has a way to say this without using that word 'God', um maybe bathed in transcendent love. Bathed in universal love. It was such a strong feeling.

(Swift et al. 2017, p. 504).

Part of the mechanism leading to such experiences of universal love may well be that common core of mystical-type experience, the disruption and disintegration of the phenomenal self-model. It is a venerable idea, which awaits rigorous empirical investigation (Millière et al. 2018), that the experience of selfless consciousness might be a reliable means of promoting selflessness in the *moral* sense—i.e., decreased self-interested and increased altruistic motivation (Ahlskog 2017).¹ If this is true, then episodes of selfless consciousness (or self-unbinding) might have an important role to play in the moral life. One of the best-known articulations of this idea in recent Western philosophy is Iris Murdoch's notion of *unselfing*:

I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important. And of course this is something which we may also do deliberately: give attention to nature in order to clear our minds of selfish care.

(Murdoch 1970, p. 84).

We can remain agnostic, for now, on whether unselfing really does promote virtuous *behaviour*, though there is intriguing preliminary evidence for this claim (cf. Kähönen 2020).² Considerable evidence shows that unselfing (understood as the unbinding of the self-model via disruption of its neuronal substrates) promotes other pillars of spirituality that require no non-naturalistic ideations: feelings of connectedness, aspiration, and reflection on the Big Questions. As Stone suggests, unselfing is indeed the core factor unifying the various elements of spirituality whose cultivation is consistent with a naturalistic outlook.

¹ Van Mulukom et al. (2020) report findings consistent with this hypothesis: an association between uncontrolled psychedelic experiences and decreased narcissistic tendencies. On the other hand, Pokorny et al. (2017) report some evidence that moral decision making, or a certain measure thereof, is unaltered during the acute psychedelic experience. (Of course this is consistent with the hypothesis that it is altered *after* the experience.)

² Juuso Kähönen and I converged independently on the idea of using Murdoch's concept of unselfing to analyse psychedelic experience.

Here, then, is a psychedelic argument for the claim that spirituality can be naturalised:

1. Unselfing and its typical effects, such as feelings of connection, aspiration, and reflection on Big Questions, are the features in virtue of which psychedelic experiences count as genuinely spiritual
2. Unselfing and these typical effects thereof do not require, and often occur in the absence of, any inclination towards non-naturalistic beliefs
3. Therefore, genuinely spiritual experiences do not require, and often occur in the absence of, any inclination towards non-naturalistic beliefs

Of course, an argument of this kind cannot be regarded as conclusive: terms such as 'spirituality' and their associated concepts are intrinsically contested. If someone adopts an understanding of spirituality on which it necessarily involves metaphysical beliefs in spirits or a spiritual realm, we cannot *demonstrate* that they are incorrect. There are doubtless legitimate senses of the term on which this entailment holds. However, I think that the considerations outlined here show that there is a real phenomenon, referred to by at least one legitimate sense of the term, on which the entailment fails: transformative practices and experiences of unselfing whose sincere undertaking requires no non-naturalistic ideations. Psychedelic evidence reveals a set of core features that move people to describe practices and experiences as 'spiritual' despite bearing no necessary connection to such ideations.

This concludes my case for the claim that the Entheogenic Conception of psychedelics can be naturalised. In the next and final chapter, I summarise the discussion and reflect on its implications, as well as suggesting some directions for future research.