

Short Communication

ENTHEOGENS II: ON ENTHEOLOGY AND ENTHEOBOTANY

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I read with interest Aline Lucas's *Short Communication* "Entheology" as well as Marlene Dobkin de Rios's accompanying response in the July–September 1995 *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* [27(3): 293–95, 297–98], concerning the coining of *entheology/entheological* at Harvard Divinity School, and the subsequent discussion of the term at the "Psychoactive Sacraments" conference in February 1995. This word also appeared contemporaneously in print in the title of "An Invitation to Entheological Dialogue" in *MAPS Bulletin* (Young 1995). As one of the coiners of the cognate term *entheogen* (Ruck et al. 1979) and one of its leading proponents—I have used the neologism in the titles of my last four books: Ott 1995, 1994, 1993; Wasson et al. 1986—I welcome this new derivative, and would gladly have defined it in my recent lexicon *The Angels' Dictionary* (Ott 1995) had I learned of it in time. I wish, however, to attempt to clarify persistent confusion concerning the meaning of *entheogen*, which has confounded debate over this word since its debut in these pages in 1979 (see Appendix).

Lucas quotes Ralph Metzner's objection to *entheogen* as "an unfortunate choice because it suggests the 'god within,' or divine principle, is somehow 'generated' in these states. My experiences have led me to the opposite conclusion: the god within is the generator..." (Metzner 1988: 19). This objection was echoed in a recent article arguing for the use of the likewise controversial word *psychedelic*, alleging that the *-gen* suffix "falls short of the mark as a befitting term to describe the effect of revelation. That is to say the chemical does not produce, originate or form anything at all. It allows something, which is already there, to happen" (Callaway 1993:55). However, the suffix *-gen* rather denotes the action of "becoming," as we stated in our article proposing the word, and as Lucas quoted same in her opening paragraph: "In combination with the Greek root *gen-*, which denotes the action of 'becoming,' this word results in the term that we are proposing: *entheogen*" (Ruck et al. 1979:146). *Entheogen* thus means

literally "becoming divine within," *not* "generating the divine within," and Metzner's and Callaway's objections are specious, and might have been overcome had they read carefully our article (neither cited it). Just as we refer to changing mental states in common parlance with the verb *become* (e.g., "she became angry," "he became upset"), it is consistent and appropriate to speak of religious ecstasy catalyzed by visionary plant-sacraments as "becoming divine within." I am in agreement with Metzner and Callaway that visionary drugs catalyze or facilitate an intrinsic capability of human beings, but in no way does the term *entheogen* suggest otherwise, that the sacrament is producing or generating such a state. This confusion regarding the suffix *-gen* derives from Antoine L. Lavoisier's coining of the words *oxygène* and *hydrogène* (originally *oxygine* and *hydrogine*) for *engendrant l'acide* and *engendrant l'eau* ("engendering acid" and "engendering water") and the suffix has henceforth been used in scientific nonce-words to mean "that which produces" (Moore 1939:100). However, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* noted (Compact Edition, p. 1126): "the fact that the suffix...[-gen] was not capable of meaning 'that which produces' was overlooked or disregarded [by Lavoisier]." This picayune objection to *entheogen* is captious.

Another statement by Lucas (p. 293) goes to the crux of the debate over *entheogen*, to wit: "Ruck offered those invested in the broad study of psychoactive substances a convenient term to describe a specific utilization of these substances: a psychedelic is called an entheogen when, and only when, it is ingested in a religious context for a spiritual purpose" [italics added]. *Entheogen[ic]* was proposed as a name for a subclass of *psychotropic* or *psychoactive* plants (and, by extension, their active principles and derivatives "both natural and artificial"), as a broad term to describe the cultural context of use, not specific chemistry or pharmacology; as an efficient substitute for cumbersome terms like *shamanic inebriant*, *visionary drug*, *plant-sacrament*, and *plant-teacher*. *Entheogen* refers to plants or drugs "ingested in a religious context for a spiritual purpose," as Lucas correctly observes, but the term is decidedly *not* limited to so-called *psychedelics* so used. Moreover, as we explicitly noted in our original article, the word was coined "for describing states of shamanic and ecstatic possession...as well as...those religious rites in which mystical states were experienced through the ingestion of substances that were transubstantial with the deity" (Ruck et al. 1979:146). Lucas might more accurately have said

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that in *entheogen* we offered "a convenient term to describe a specific utilization of these substances: any drug is called an entheogen when, and only when, it is ingested in a shamanic or religious context for a shamanic or a spiritual purpose." An *entheogenic* drug must needs be *psychotropic*, but the term is far more specific than that catchall designation. In a review of our *Persephone's Quest: Entheogens and the Origins of Religion* (Wasson et al. 1986), Weston La Barre objected strenuously to *entheogen[ic]* (and also, incidentally, to *psychedelic*), noting: "'Psychotropic' is to be recommended for all properly objective [*sic*] usage" (La Barre 1988:222). La Barre's recommendation is tantamount to surrender, to conceding that we cannot semantically distinguish mescaline, say, from chlorpromazine (Thorazine). Moreover, La Barre rejected our word on the grounds that "the 'power' American Indians find in hallucinogens is not sufficiently personalized or individuated to be dubbed 'god,' nor do classic peoples conceptualize hallucinogens in this way" (La Barre 1988:222). With all due respect to Professor La Barre, who is my esteemed elder colleague, this is absurd—even he found the necessity to be more specific in this statement than the word *psychotropic* would allow. Surely he did not mean to allege that American Indians and "classic peoples" conceptualized the spiritual power they accessed through plant-teachers as hallucinations.

Similarly, in her comments on Lucas's article and "criticisms of the term 'entheogen,'" Marlene Dobkin de Rios notes: "...when native peoples who utilize plant hallucinogens do so, they generally do it in the context of seeking out exogenous forces as opposed to generating 'a divine force' within the individual or releasing something that is *in the person*" (Dobkin de Rios 1995:297). Like Metzner, Callaway and La Barre, Dobkin de Rios failed to cite our article, and seems to take Lucas's inaccurate and too-restrictive definition of *entheogen* at face value, falling into their same error regarding "generation." The exogenous forces she describes are precisely the *theos* [θεός] in the broadest, pagan, polytheistic sense, and the dimension in which such are sought is most decidedly within the individual, within what Ernst Jünger called the *psychocosmos* (Jünger 1970; Ott 1995), for the shamanic inebriant is ingested by the *psychonaut*, not cast to the four winds. As we also noted in our article proposing *entheogen*, it was the pre-Christian, polytheistic Greeks, classic peoples all, who coined the designation *entheos* [ενθεός] to describe divine inspiration (*pace* La Barre), and nobody objects to the use of another word derived from this classical root, *enthusiasm*—"the fact of being ενθεός possessed by a god" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, Compact Edition, p. 876). Again, are we to understand Dobkin de Rios as averring that the power and exogenous forces sought by native peoples is nothing but a hallucination, best described by referring to shamanic inebriants as "plant hallucinogens," plants that cause one to become hallucinatory?

For the fact of the matter is, we do need to be specific when talking about this class of drugs, and the terms most commonly used are *hallucinogen*, *entheogen*, and *psychedelic*. *Hallucinogen* is the word most widely used in the scientific literature, *entheogen* bids fair to become the preferred term in the ethnographic literature, whereas *psychedelic* remains the favored term within the counterculture, and also has some adherents in the scientific and medical communities. *Hallucinogen* has in general been falling out of favor, inasmuch as ethnographers, physicians, and scientists familiar with the effects of these drugs are increasingly in consensus over one notion—that the visionary states accessed through the agency of these drugs are *not* hallucinatory. Moreover, hallucinations are considered medically to be pathological, and one of the predominant traditional contexts of use of these drugs is in healing, as medicine. Humphry Osmond took care to employ the anomalous root *psyche-* in his formation of *psychedelic*, generally taken to mean "mind-manifesting," in order to distinguish it from the correct root *psycho-*, which has come to refer mainly to psychosis (*psycho* itself is a common slang word for a deranged person, following the phenomenal success of Alfred Hitchcock's film by that title). However, in many languages, such as Spanish, the word is commonly rendered *psychodelic*, as Aldous Huxley generally spelled it, and outside of the counterculture, however spelled, this is a pejorative epithet, roughly equivalent to *psychotomimetic*, "psychosis-mimicking." The *Heritage Illustrated Dictionary of the English Language* (1979: 1055) defines *psychedelic* as: "Of, pertaining to, or generating hallucinations, distortions of perception, and, occasionally, states resembling psychosis" (emphasis added—note how the concept of *generation* has crept in here, too, much to the chagrin of the proponents of *psychedelic*). In México, [*p*]sicodélico (or the orthographically cumbersome [*p*]siquedélico) commonly evokes the image of indolent hippies at best, or of Charles Manson at worst; never of María Sabina.

While Lucas is clearly comfortable with the *entheos* part of the word, objections have been raised to *entheogen* as "a clumsy word freighted with theological baggage," although it seems incongruous to suggest such in a book about our ineffable drugs titled *Food of the Gods* (McKenna 1992:110). I must point out, however, that *psychedelic*, the word favored by Terence McKenna, is at least as heavily freighted with theological baggage as is *entheogen*. The *-delos* suffix, taken to mean "revealing" or "manifesting," is a variant of the root *deiw-* meaning "to shine," was originally the "name of the sky god" and is cognate with Latin *deus*, "god, deity" (*Heritage Dictionary*, p. 1511). *Psychedelic* thus means literally "deity in the psyche"; so much for psychedelic atheism.

Our goal in proposing *entheogen[ic]* was not simply to retire faulty and pejorative designations like *psychoto-*

mimetic, hallucinogenic and psychedelic, but to have a word that would allow us to speak in the same breath of such chemically and pharmacologically diverse plant-drugs (and their contained active principles) as tobacco, *Amanita muscaria*, *ayahuasca*, the Mexican shamanic morning glory seeds *ololiuhquiltliltliltzin*, and *Salvia divinorum*. All of these drugs are, manifestly, shamanic inebriants, visionary drugs and plant-teachers. Ethnographers and ethnobotanists (though perhaps not phytochemists nor pharmacologists) clearly have a need to discuss these diverse plant-drugs as a class, as kindred vision-producing psychoactive drugs traditionally utilized in shamanic divination and healing; sometimes also as sacraments in religious communion. McKenna, however, a prime partisan of *psychedelic*, notes of tobacco that although it is "potentially hallucinogenic" it is merely an "adjunct of the more powerful and visionary hallucinogenic plants" (1992:196-97). With regard to *Amanita muscaria*, he cites an "extremely sophisticated subject" to the effect that this mushroom "was not truly psychedelic" (1992:110), and of its major active principle states that "muscamol [*sic*] is not a deep hallucinogen" (1991:150). Concerning *ayahuasca* (which by itself, without tryptamine-rich admixtures, is a type of sedative), McKenna at one point commented that the β -carboline alkaloids it contains were "hallucinogenic in themselves" (1992:247), although he had earlier noted that the major *ayahuasca* β -carboline, harmine, was "not overtly psychedelic" (1992:225). The morning glory seeds were characterized by McKenna as "vision-inducing" (1992:241) and were said to "contain hallucinogenic indoles" (1992:233), yet others have questioned whether these alkaloids could have been the "psychedelic" active principles of the *kykeon*, the sacramental potion of the Eleusinian Mysteries (Valencic 1994). The potent visionary drug *Salvia divinorum*, used as a shamanic inebriant by the Mazatec Indians of México, is "not a hallucinogen" according to one expert (Pendell 1995:163). So tobacco is "potentially hallucinogenic," but really only "an adjunct of the more powerful and visionary hallucinogenic plants"; *Amanita muscaria* and its principle muscimol are neither "truly psychedelic" nor "a deep hallucinogen"; *ayahuasca* alkaloids are "hallucinogenic" but "not overtly psychedelic"; and *Salvia divinorum* is "not a hallucinogen." Clearly *psychedelic* and *hallucinogenic* are not uniformly applicable to these drugs, all of which are *entheogens*, along with the unequivocal, classic "psychedelic" and "hallucinogenic" drugs mescaline/*péyotl*, psilocybine/*teonanácatl* and, of course, LSD. For even McKenna conceded that *Amanita muscaria*, being neither *psychedelic* nor *hallucinogenic*, nonetheless could "induce religious feeling and ecstasy" (1991:150).

With regard to shamanism, I have one final objection to *psychedelic*. This word has a strictly modern connotation, referring specifically to contemporary, nontraditional

use, mainly of LSD, and secondarily of kindred plant-drugs. When we speak of psychedelic art, psychedelic music, psychedelic culture, it is clear we are talking of contemporary western counterculture, and referring mainly to LSD and the 1960s (Rätsch 1993). It is thus incongruous to speak of a shaman, a noble practitioner of humankind's oldest profession, from which all human culture is thought to derive (La Barre 1979), taking a psychedelic plant. Moreover, drug-scene folklore and fraudulent misrepresentation aside, it is obvious that the overwhelming majority of *psychedelic* use in the 1960s involved LSD, an artificial creation of the pharmaceutical industry that has never been found in any plant (Ott 1993). Thus the prototypical psychedelic drug is one free of associations with traditional, shamanic or religious use; albeit sometimes involved in contemporary, nontraditional entheogenic use.

Entheogen[ic], therefore, is not a synonym for *psychedelic* nor *hallucinogen[ic]*, although virtually all psychedelic and hallucinogenic drugs have been entheogens. I am in full agreement with *psychedelic* proponent J.C. Callaway, that *hallucinogen[ic]* "should be dropped entirely from use," but not in agreement that it be applied "to drugs whose primary psychoactive effects are to engender true hallucinations (e.g., certain tropane alkaloids)" (Callaway 1993:56), since tropane-containing plant-drugs have found pangæan use as entheogens (Ott 1993). I once used this word and have long since abandoned it—I say *requiescat in pace*. We have seen that *psychedelic* is pejorative outside of the counterculture, has both the theological baggage and shadow of "generation" that some find objectionable in *entheogen[ic]*, is not applied uniformly to important shamanic inebriants by its proponents, and has a western-ethnocentric, countercultural, decidedly modern connotation, making it an inappropriate word for any shamanic plant. After all, in shamanism we are dealing with the most archaic and pangæan of human traditions, the veritable "well-springs of cultural history" (Wasson 1961:139), the antithesis of modern or countercultural. Since the prototypical psychedelic drug is LSD, a modern creation of the western pharmaceutical industry, and since the prototypical psychedelic drug use is contemporary and nontraditional, I propose that we restrict the use of *psychedelic* to modern, nontraditional use of LSD and kindred synthetic or isolated and purified visionary drugs, whether such use be ludible or medical/therapeutic (e.g., psychedelic therapy). Note that Callaway, in the above-cited quotations, referred to a drug he calls *psychedelic* as "the chemical," and not as "the plant" and to "tropane alkaloids," not to "nightshades" (Callaway 1993:55, 56). However, *psychedelic shamanism* (DeKorne 1994) is an oxymoron, and should one wish to address the general, noncountercultural, intellectual community, one had better avoid the binomial *psychedelic plant* in reference to shamanism, lest one prejudice the subject from the outset,

depaupering and demeaning a noble tradition worthy of our deepest respect.

In conclusion, while I welcome the neologism *entheology/entheological*, I prefer to characterize the scientific study of *entheogens* as *entheobotany* (my variant of Mary Barnard's proposed term *theo-botany*) (Barnard 1963: 579; Ott 1995:88). This puts the emphasis on the plants, not on the theologians, and one could also argue that *entheology* is a pleonasm, inasmuch as the *theos* [θεός] and the *logos* [λόγος] that are "within" could be said to be one and the same. Moreover, the nature of shamanic ecstasy catalyzed by entheogens is ineffable, transcending our linguistics, our logic, our science, and our reason. Although the essence of *entheology* is apposite: "a rational inquiry into *entheogens* and religion," *theology* also has the sense of a "formalized body of opinions concerning God" as Christians conceptualize deity (*Heritage Dictionary*, p. 1334). This reading of the word prompted Dobkin de Rios's objections to *entheology*. Had she read carefully our paper, she would have realized her remonstrance could hardly be

extended to the original term *entheogen*, whose primary reference was "describing states of shamanic and ecstatic possession induced by ingestion of mind-altering drugs." (Ruck et al. 1979:146)

The *theos* of *entheogen* is shamanic ecstasy, the *real* "Old Time Religion," not its exsanguinated, contemporary evocations in the form of purely symbolic, monotheistic nonreligions devoid of ecstasy, based on *placebo* sacraments (Ott 1995) that are, indeed, nothing more than a historical flash in the pan. As R. Gordon Wasson (1986:78) put it so well, in reference to some primordial experience of entheogenic ecstasy: "At that point Religion was born, Religion pure and simple, free of Theology, free of Dogmatics, expressing itself in awe and reverence and in lowered voices, mostly at night, when people would gather together to consume the Sacred Element. The first entheogenic experience could have been the first, and an authentic, perhaps the only authentic miracle. This was the beginning of the Age of the Entheogens, long, long ago."

APPENDIX

The following is the text of the original article "Entheogens," by Carl A.P. Ruck, Jeremy Bigwood, Danny Staples, Jonathan Ott and R. Gordon Wasson, which appeared in the Journal of Psychedelic Drugs Vol. 11(1-2): 145-46, January-June 1979.

All languages grow together with the peoples who speak them, borrowing or inventing terms to keep pace with what is new and retiring others when they are no longer needed. When the recent surge of recreational use of so-called "hallucinogenic" or "psychedelic" drugs first came to popular attention in the early 1960s, it was commonly viewed with suspicion and associated with the behavior of deviant or revolutionary groups. Apart from the slang of the various subcultures, there was no adequate terminology for this class of drugs. Words were manufactured, and in their making they betrayed the incomprehension or prejudice of the times.

Out of the many words proposed to describe this unique class of drugs only a few have survived in current usage. It is the contention of the authors who have subscribed their names to this article that none of these terms really deserve greater longevity, if our language is not to perpetuate the misunderstandings of the past.

We commonly refer, for example, to the alteration of sensory perceptions as "hallucination" and hence a drug that effected such a change became known as an "hallucinogen."¹ The verb "hallucinate," however, immediately imposes a value judgment upon the nature of the altered perceptions, for it means "to be deceived or entertain false notions." It comes from the Latin (*h)al(l)ucinari*, "to wander mentally or talk nonsensically," and is synonymous with verbs meaning to be delirious or insane. It appears, moreover, to have been borrowed from the Greek, where it is related to a group of words that imply restless movement and perplexed excitement, such as that caused by grief and despair.

How can such a term allow one to discuss without bias those transcendent and beatific states of communion with deity that numerous peoples believe they or their shamans attain through the ingestion of what we now call "hallucinogens?"

The other terms are no less damning. During the first decade after the discovery of LSD, scientific investigators of the influence of these drugs on the mental processes (most of whom, it is clear, had no personal experience of their effects) had the impression that they seemed to approximate deranged and psychotic states. Hence the term "psychotomimetic" was coined for a drug that induced psychosis. Psychology, which is etymologically the study of the "soul," has until recently concerned itself only with mental illness and aberrant behavior, and all of the terms formed from the *psycho-* root suffer from this connotation of sickness: psychotic, for example, cannot mean "soulful." Osmond attempted to avoid these adverse associations when he coined "psychedelic,"² the only word in English that employs the anomalous root *psyche-* instead of *psycho-*, in hopes that this term, as distinct from "psychotomimetic," might indicate something that "reveals the soul." However, not only is "psychedelic" an incorrect verbal formation, but it has become so invested with connotations of the pop-culture of the 1960s that it is incongruous to speak of a shaman's taking a "psychedelic" drug. It is probable, moreover, that even its anomalous formation cannot isolate it from confusion with the *psycho-* words, so that it suffers from the same problem as "psychotropic," which tends to mean something that "turns one toward psychotic states" instead of merely toward an altered mentality.

We, therefore, propose a new term that would be appropriate for describing states of shamanic and ecstatic possession induced by ingestion of mind-altering drugs. In Greek the word *entheos* means literally "god (*theos*) within," and was used to describe the condition that follows when one is inspired and possessed by the god that has entered one's body. It was applied

to prophetic seizures, erotic passion and artistic creation, as well as to those religious rites in which mystical states were experienced through the ingestion of substances that were transubstantial with the deity. In combination with the Greek root *gen-*, which denotes the action of "becoming," this word results in the term that we are proposing: *entheogen*. Our word sits easily on the tongue and seems quite natural in English. We could speak of *entheogens* or, in an adjectival form, of *entheogenic* plants or substances. In a strict sense, only those vision-producing drugs that can be shown to have figured in shamanic or religious rites would be designated entheogens, but in a looser sense, the term could also be applied to other drugs, both natural and artificial, that induce alterations of consciousness similar to those documented for ritual ingestion of traditional entheogens.

NOTES

1. "Hallucinogen" and "hallucinogenic" were first used in print by Donald Johnson, an English physician, in a pamphlet entitled *The Hallucinogenic Drugs* (Christopher Johnson, London, 1953). Johnson, however, borrowed the term from three

American physicians, Abram Hoffer, Humphry Osmond and John Smythies, who did not use it in print until the following year.

2. In a letter to Humphry Osmond dated 30 March 1956, Aldous Huxley proposed that mescaline be called a "phanerothyme." Huxley penned the sprightly lines:

To make this trivial world sublime,
Take a half a gramme of phanerothyme.

Osmond replied with the following ditty:

To fathom Hell or soar angelic,
Just take a pinch of psychedelic.

Much of the credit must go to Ralph Metzner and Timothy Leary for popularizing "psychedelic." In the spring of 1963, the premier issue of *Psychedelic Review* was published in Cambridge, Massachusetts, under the editorship of Metzner, Osmond and Leary, among others. *Psychedelic Review* is now defunct, but the term is perpetuated by the title of the present *Journal of Psychedelic Drugs*. Huxley's odd term did not fare so well. From Huxley's letter it is clear the word meant "soul-manifester" to him. Greek *thymos*, however, means "organ of passion, temper and anger," and "phanerothyme" would indicate a drug which made intense emotions manifest.

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