



Terence McKenna

The Importance of Psychedelics

Presented at ???

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Well, *The World and Its Double* is how we styled this. This is simply a high-visibility, flashy way of reminding people whose eyes fall upon that text that the world has a double. The world is not entirely, or completely, what it seems to be. Culture – and by culture, I mean any culture, anywhere, any time – gives you the message that everything is humdrum, everything is normal. In other words, culture denies experience. You know – we all have had, and even a population of non-psychedelic people have had – prophetic dreams, intimations, unlikely strings of coincidences, all of these sort of things. These are experiences which cultures deny. Cultures put in place – I’m sure you’ve heard this word – a *paradigm*, and then what fits within the cultural paradigm is accentuated, stressed, and what doesn’t fit inside the cultural paradigm is denied, marginalised, argued against; and we live at the end of a thousand-year binge on the philosophical position known as materialism, in its many guises. And the basic message of materialism is that the world is what it appears to be: a thing composed of matter, and pretty much confined to its surface. The world is what it appears to be.

Now, this, on the face of it, is a tremendously naïve position, because what it says is the animal body that you inhabit, the eyes you look through, the fingers you feel through, are somehow the ultimate instruments of metaphysical conjecture... which is highly improbable. It seems to me, metaphysical conjecture begins with the logic of the situation, and then proceeds in whatever direction that logic will carry you. Well, if logic is true to experience, then we have to make room in any theory for invisible connectedness between people; anticipation of a future that has not yet occurred; shared dreaming; all kinds of possibilities that materialism has denied. For approximately 500 years, the great era of the triumph of modern science, materialism has had the field all to itself; and its argument for its pre-eminence was the beautiful toys that it could create: aircraft, railroads, global economies, television, spacecraft. But that is a fool’s argument for truth! I mean, that’s after all how a medicine show operates, you know: the juggler is so good, the medicine must be even better! This is not an entirely rational way to proceed. And now, at the end of 500 years of the practice of “rational” scientific culture, we are literally at the end of our rope! Reason, and science, and the practice of unbridled capitalism, have not delivered us into an angelic realm. Quite the contrary: they’ve delivered 3% of us into an angelic realm, completely overshadowed by guilt about what’s happening to the other 97% of us who are eating it!

It’s not a pretty picture, modern civilisation. Most people in the world today are quite miserable, actually. They have very little hope; their religions, their traditional value systems, are being eroded by Dallas and Hawaii 5-0, which are on the village television every night; lifespans are being shortened by pesticides, chemicals, all kinds of things in the environment; and there is very little political light on the horizon. So I believe that it’s reasonable, looking at this situation, to say that history failed; and that the grand dream of Western civilisation has in fact failed. And now we are

attempting – with basically a carved wooden oar – to turn a battleship around. And it's a very frustrating undertaking. The momentum for catastrophe is enormous in this situation. But it's not 100% certain that catastrophe is what we're headed for, because we are not 100% unconscious. There are people struggling to figure out how to control population, struggling to figure out how to balance the relationship between the masculine and the feminine, struggling to bring amelioration of hunger and disease to various parts of the world. So we're in essentially a tragic situation. A tragic situation is a catastrophe when you know it, you see. And part of the Western impulse has been to subjugate all other cultural styles to our own. And this has taken the form of actually swallowing and digesting Native American culture; the ethnicity of European culture has been replaced by the megaculture of Nouveau Europa, whatever that means; cultures are melted down in the belly of the Western scientific beast and then they become structural members in an ever-expanding edifice of Western scientism.

However, the psychedelic experience, as practised by shamans in many, many parts of the world, is apparently a bite too large to swallow. Psychedelics arrived on the Western agenda only about 100 years ago, when German chemists brought peyote to Berlin and extracted mescaline; and for the next 50 years, up until about 1945 (55 years, make it), very little happened. Mescaline did not – though it was taken by Havelock Ellis and William James, and F. Weir Mitchell, and – it did not spawn a craze; it did not influence large numbers of intellectuals particularly. Then in the 1940s, LSD was discovered; in the 1950s, DMT and psilocybin were discovered; and then, in 1966, all these things were made illegal. There was no real opportunity for Western science to grapple with these things before they were decided to be too hot to handle. Made not only unavailable to people such as you and I, ordinary people, but taken off the agenda of scientific research!

In the Middle Ages, the church forbade dissection of human bodies, and medical students would visit battlefields and the gallows at night, and steal the bodies of victims of war and executed prisoners, in order to learn human physiology. Where that spirit of scientific courage has gone, I don't know; but there is very little of it left. Now, people feed at the trough of government grants and enormous corporate research budgets, and the idea of actually pursuing truth, or attempting to understand the phenomenon in an unbiased fashion, divorced from its commercial, social and political dimensions, is unheard of.

...if you look at thousands of these experiences, is: they dissolve boundaries. They dissolve boundaries between you and your past; you and the part of your unconscious you don't want to look at; between you and your partner; between you and the feminine, if you're masculine, and vice versa; between you and the world; all the boundaries that we put up to keep ourselves from feeling our circumstance are dissolved, and boundary dissolution is the most threatening activity that can go on in a society. People – meaning government institutions – become very nervous when people begin to talk to each other. [input from audience] – Yes. The whole name of the Western game is to create boundaries and maintain them. The Church and the State; the poor and the wealthy; the black and the white; the male and the female; the young and the old; the gay and the straight; the living and the dead; the foreign and the familiar... all of these categorical divisions allow a kind of thinking that is completely cockamamie. After all, reality is in fact a seamless, unspeakable something; and we understand that to perceive it separately is a necessary adjunct to the act of understanding, but it is not the end of the program of understanding! Particulate data has to be recombined in a paradigm, a seamless overview of what is happening; and the drugs that Western society has traditionally favoured have either been drugs which maintain boundaries or drugs which promote mindless

repetitious physical activity on the assembly line, in the slave galley, on the latifundi of the slave-driven agricultural project... whatever it is. In the corporate office.

This is why every labour contract on this planet – at least, in Western civilisation – contains a provision that all workers shall be allowed to use drugs twice a day at designated times; but the drug shall be caffeine. Now, the reason why caffeine is so welcome in the workplace is because the last three hours of the workday are utterly unproductive unless you goose everybody with two cups of coffee, and then they can go back to the word processor, the widget-tightening machine, or whatever they're doing, and mindlessly and happily carry on. If it were to be suggested that there be a pot break twice a day [laughter], you know, you would think that civilisation was striking the iceberg or something! And alcohol... our society is an alcohol, red meat, sugar and tobacco culture. And all of these are forms of speed, basically, in the way that we use them. I mean, yes, you can tranquillise yourself on alcohol, but you're pushing toward levels where a lifetime of tranquillising yourself on alcohol will be a short lifetime, if you use it that way.

So there's a lot of tension in society between the great exploring soul and the assembly-line citizen. The citizen is defined by obligation, and by the boundaries that define, you know, the next citizen – either because it's a neighbour, or a worker, or an employer, or something like that; and the grand exploring soul is marginalised as an eccentric or, if necessary, more seriously marginalised as mad in some way. I mean, madness basically – up until the level of physical violence – means “You are behaving in a way which makes me feel uncomfortable, therefore there's something wrong with you.” Yes...

So – Now, it's interesting, and this is one of the points that's dear to me – I mean, they arrive in different orders each time, but – I think of history as a kind of mass psychedelic experience; and the drug is technology. And as technology gets more and more perfected as a mirror of the human mind, the cultural experience becomes more and more hallucinatory. And for at least the past couple of hundred years, boundary dissolution has been underway at every level of Western civilisation. I mean, you could push it further back: the Magna Carta, the fact that princes and lords of the realm would actually attempt to force the king's signature on a document defining their privileges – they are, after all, ordinary human beings; the king is the divine appointed regent of God in Heaven! So this was a severe boundary dissolution, within the context of the age in which it was taking place. They were actually saying, “You, as Christ's representative on Earth, should seed some of this omnipotence to us mere mortals, suspended in the political process” – well, that leads then to broader demands for human rights: for the idea that a permanent and large segment of society kept in permanent poverty is unacceptable... we got rid of debtors' prisons, and things like this.

As the collectivity of our humanness becomes an intellectual legacy for all of us, there is a dissolving of boundaries of race, class, status, language, so forth and so on; and the whole of the 20th century has seen a massive acceleration of this. The breakdown of the Soviet Union was in fact simply – it was even so described: the lifting of the Iron Curtain – meaning a membrane has suddenly disappeared; and more and more of these membranes are disappearing, and what is emerging then is a more and more psychedelic experience – meaning a sense of acceleration of information flow; a sense of rising ambiguity about what it all means; everything seems to carry both a good facet and a detrimental facet; the ambiguity of everything is increasing; the connectedness of everything is increasing; and I will argue, later in the day, that this is a general tendency of the time and space in which we are embedded, and that we ourselves are a reflection of this.

Where is life carrying us? What is this all about? Is it carrying us toward extinction, so that the rest of Nature can heave an enormous sigh of relief and then get back to the business of nest-building, mating flights and overposturing, and whatever it is that they're doing out there? – or is it carrying us toward some kind of a transition? If you look back through the history of life – which is a long history, I mean it reaches back a billion years – it's... every advance happens suddenly, unpredictably, and in a very short period of time. Some of you who stay tuned to the scientific literature may have noticed this series of articles that were around last week, about what they're calling the Big Bang of Biology: that there was a period of time – incredibly brief, perhaps between a million and ten million years – when all the phyla of life on this planet radiated into existence: some time between 525 and 535 million years ago – just, it all snapped into existence. The episode in which life left the sea is a similar highly confined transition event. People recently have written about what they call punctuated evolution; evolution is not, apparently, a slow curve of unfoldment – it is instead a series of equilibrium states punctuated by violent fluctuations in between, and then a new equilibrium state.

So history, I believe, is not an aberration, any more than leaving the sea could be called an aberration of marine existence. I mean, obviously it is not marine existence, and obviously we are not living in the same world as groundhogs and hummingbirds, psychologically; but leaving the sea did not represent an ontological transition. It represented an extremely dramatic shift of modality, and this is what history is. History is characterised by its brevity, for one thing. I mean, we have packed more change into the last ten thousand years than the billion years which preceded it. And yet, as entities, as animals, meat, we have not changed at all in ten thousand years. If you were to go back to that era, the people would be exactly like people we see today. They wouldn't be so racially heterogeneous, because the great gene streamings and migrations that characterise history had not yet taken place; but essentially, perfectly modern people. Well, then history is apparently – if we view it as a process that Nature tolerates, if not encourages – then history is essentially apparently important enough to place into... jeopardise the stability of all the rest of the natural ecosystemic world.

It's as though Nature is saying, "We are willing to place the entire planetary ecology in danger for 50,000 years in order for the opportunity to be explored of language-using, technological-expressing, intelligence carrying all of life to the next level". And it's a terrifying enterprise, because apparently to carry life to the next level, tremendous intellectual sophistication is required about the release and control of energy. The problem is, energy can be used to destroy as well as build. So as the human enterprise has moved toward greater and greater power, and ability to manipulate the environment, the stakes in the cosmic game have risen. And now what we have is approximately \$100 billion sitting in the centre of the crap table, and one roll of the dice more and we're going to either win it or lose everything. Because intelligence, if we fail, will never again reach the kind of levels on this planet that we have reached.

Why? Because we have extracted all the available metals near the surface of the Earth; an evolving species following after us will find the Earth strangely depleted of usable materials, down to the 1500-foot level; and so intelligence coming beyond us will find it just does not have the resources to make the leap to technical civilisation. So it's beginning to look like a one-shot deal. And the psychedelics are in there for two reasons. First of all, because they allow us, as individuals, to break out of the flat cultural illusion and to rise up and look at this situation, so it's for us a tool to understand our predicament; but the psychedelics are also what has driven this circumstance to arise in part, because what psychedelics do – and I think this isn't too challengeable – is they catalyse imagination. They drive you to think what you would not think otherwise. Well, notice that the enterprise of human

history is nothing more than the fall-out created by strange ideas! You know: Let's build a pyramid! Let's build a windmill! Let's build a water wheel! – you know – and then empires, philosophies, religions, arise, in the wake of these situations. I

've argued in the past – and I'm going to try not to repeat it here today, because I think you've all heard it, but I will just mention it in a sentence or two – that the critical catalyst propelling us out of the slowly evolving hominid line and caused us to take an orthogonal right-hand turn into culture, language, art, yearning... probably was the inclusion of psychedelic plants in our diet during that episodic moment when we went from being fruititarian canopy-dwellers to omnivorous pack-hunting creatures of the grassland. And it was the inclusion of psilocybin in our grassland diet that caused us to discover that there is a mind! And you can perturb it!

I mean, think about... and I don't think you could discover consciousness if you didn't perturb it, because as Marshall McClune said, "whoever discovered water, it certainly wasn't a fish". Well, we are fish swimming in consciousness; and yet we know it's there. Well, the reason we know it's there is because if you perturb it, then you see it; and you perturb it by perturbing the engine which generates it, which is the mind/brain system resting behind your eyebrows. If you swap out the ordinary chemicals that are running that system in an invisible fashion, then you see: it's like dropping ink into a bowl of clear water – suddenly the convection currents operating in the clear water become visible, because you see the particles of ink tracing out the previously invisible dynamics of the standing water. The mind is precisely like that, and the psychedelic is like a dye-marker being dropped into this aqueous system. And then you say, "Oh, I see – it works like this... and like this."

Well, if psychedelics are a catalyst for the imagination, and if history is driven by the imagination, it is driven through the fall-out from the imagination, which is technology and culture. Technology and culture are the consequences, the derivatives, of the ratiocination of the mind. And technology has – like biological life, but on a much faster, accelerated timeframe – technology has this weird tendency to transcend itself; to bootstrap itself. You know, if you have a cart, then it implies better wheels, better bearings, better structure, and then higher speed, more control, more feedback from the machine; it means we need gas gauges, RPM readouts, so forth and so on. Technology, strangely enough, created by a biological creature, has itself this self-transcending quality.

But *ever-accelerating*; this is the important point – because the ever-accelerating accretion of technology means that history is strangely foreshortened at the future end, because it happens faster and faster. It's like a process that begins very slowly, but once started has the quality of a cascade – or, you know, the rate at which falling bodies move: 32.5 feet per second, per *second*! Each second, it accelerates to twice the rate of infall that was occurring in the previous second. Technology is like this; and we now are in a domain where, if we attempt to propagate technological development forward 50 years, it becomes unmanageable as an intellectual task. We can talk about the automobile, what it might look like 50 years from now: it would float, it would go 500 miles an hour, it would be guided by your mind, so forth and so on... these kinds of ideas. But when you think that every artefact of our world will undergo that kind of transformation, and that the synergy among these transformed objects will create phenomena and situations that we can't anticipate – that's the key thing: our inability to anticipate the *synergies* between our technologies. I mean, the computer, LSD, spacecraft, holograms, organic superconductivity – those are just six areas where the integration of those concerns will produce unimaginable consequences!

The ultimate boundary dissolution is the dissolution of ego. I mean, we hope – we straight people – hope that they never meet it except at death; of course, they don't realise that going to sleep at night is a kind of ego dissolution. But the government is expressive of this dominator culture that we're living in. The ego is a very recent invention, and its hold on reality is very tenuous. And consequently it walks around imbued with fear: I mean, it feels itself to be a mouse in a world of dinosaurs. That's because it's a very recent development.

I guess I have to go back to this scenario of human development, and say, just very briefly: here's how I think this worked. I'm not going to run through the whole evolutionary scenario, but this thing about ego... All primates have what are called dominance hierarchies. That simply means that the hard-bodied, long-fanged, young males kick everybody else around. They control the females, the children, homosexuals, the elderly... everybody is taking orders from this dominance hierarchy. And this is true clear back into squirrel monkeys; it's a generalised feature of primate behaviour. And it's an aspect of our behaviour, as we sit here: women – the feminine – is not honoured; the elderly are marginalised; homosexuals, that whole issue; many of our social and political ills stem from this attitude. Well, but you see I believe that when we left the trees, and admitted psilocybin into our diet, that it has the effect of dissolving boundaries, and making this maintenance of a dominance hierarchy very very difficult.

First of all, the key on one level to maintaining the dominance hierarchy is monogamous pair-bonding. That's where it begins. In a society taking a lot of psilocybin, monogamous pair-bonding breaks down, because of the CNS activation, and sexual arousal. So in a psilocybin-using culture, there will be a tendency to orgiastic sexual behaviour, rather than monogamous pair-bonding. What that does is it causes an incredible social cohesion, because in an orgiastic society men cannot trace lines of male paternity. So men's attitude toward children is, "These children are all ours. We the group" ... it's a glue that we, in our paranoid social style, with everybody having the deed to their property and their 11-foot-high fence, can hardly imagine. But psilocybin was artificially suppressing this dominator behaviour style in the primate, the evolving protohominid now human being.

When psilocybin was taken out of the diet, the old, old primate program was still there. It had not been bred out; the genes were always there; it's just that for 50,000 or 100,000 years, we medicated ourselves – literally, religiously – we religiously medicated ourselves every new and full moon, perhaps oftener; these orgies were happening, creating social cohesion, propagating everybody forward... the problem was, when the psilocybin was taken away, we had been under its influence for perhaps half a million years. We had evolved language, rudimentary abstract philosophy, a sense of religion. We had invented technology in the form of using fire and chipping flint, and all that. The psilocybin goes away, and suddenly these skills, these tools, these technologies, are in the hands of marauding apes – not any more cohesive caring human social groups, but marauding territorial apes, driven by the desire to control all weaker members of the social group.

And that's our circumstance! We have, you know, the tools that would allow us to sculpt paradise, but we have the reflexes and value systems of anthropoid apes of some sort – so the split between our conscious hopes, our best foot, and the bottom of the human scale, is appalling. I mean, look at the spread! It's a spread from – well, from Mother Teresa to serial killers! – I mean, you don't get serial killers in the chipmunk population, or the grasshopper population – I mean, these animals are not so set at variance with their basic nature that these kinds of pathologies can erupt. We, on the other hand, are half angel, half pack-hunting killer ape. I mean, we are an object-fetish society – I mean, our entire psychology is characterised by a profound discontent. That's what we're about. It doesn't matter – no

matter what's going on, after a little while we get restless and move on; other animal species are embedded in a kind of world of endless genetic cycling. No fox grows bored with hunting, you know?! – and yet our thing is a profound dis-ease.

And I believe it's because – and slowly you've forced me to do this whole rap, which I swore I wouldn't do – I believe it's because the psilocybin led us halfway toward a kind of godhead, but then it disappeared, and we are left in this very peculiar situation. This is the myth of the Fall; you know, we are half angel, half beast – and these two natures are united in every one of us. And when you take psilocybin, you feel generally a great sense of community, an ascent to a higher level. If you completely restrict your intake of intoxicants of any sort, then you get the teetotaler type personality, which is characterised by incredible smugness, limited intellectual horizons, and an unbearable aura of self-congratulation that makes it pretty hard for the rest of us to put up with.

See, here is the final piece of this evolutionary key. Psilocybin, in small amounts, increases visual acuity. This is not an arguable point; I mean, you can just give people psilocybin and give them eye tests, and people with astigmatisms see better; your edge-detection ability is greatly increased. Well, you can see that an animal like our remote ancestors, in a hunting environment in the grassland, if there is an item of diet that will make you a better and more efficient hunter, the equivalent of chemical binoculars lying around on the grassland, those animals that avail themselves of this technology will be more successful hunters. And so it was: animals using psilocybin were more successful at raising their offspring to reproductive age. Well, then at slightly higher doses you get this CNS arousal, which in highly sexed animals such as primates, arousal means sexual arousal – an erection in the male – so then there is, without the overwhelming influence of Christian ethics to guide their behaviours, I'm sure these organisms simply flopped in a heap, and – you know, sorted it all out later! So that's the middle range of the dosage. Low dose: success in hunting. Medium dose: social cohesion achieved through ego dissolution and orgiastic sexuality.

Yet higher doses, 5 grams and up: hunting is out of the question; sex is out of the question; you're just nailed to the ground by the campfire, and in the course of the evening you discover religion! [laughter] Philosophy! Art! – and, you know, all of that. So here is a unique chemical that, at every dose level, synergises activity that leads to greater coherency and self-expression. The driving of the imagination – yes, in the question back here you said you can't create what you can't conceive of; this is why what the psychedelic experience does, really, is it stretches the envelope of the imaginable. I mean, what can be imagined can be created; what cannot be imagined is not part of the play. So psilocybin really was a stimulant for the production of intellectual product in the form of songs, rituals, dances, body painting, abstract ideas. All of these things are what we are most unique.

Well, that's how it seemed to me. It seemed to me, culture is a shabby lie – or at least, this culture is a shabby lie. I mean, if you work like a dog, you get 260 channels of bad television and a German automobile! What kind of perfection is that?! We have our secular society – religion is completely devalued – and consumer object fetishism is the only kind of worth that we collectively recognise. I'm sure you've all seen the T-shirt that says "He" – notice, *he* – "who dies with the most toys, wins". That is in fact the banner under which we're flying here. And the level of unhappiness is immense. I mean, the level of unhappiness among the poor, they've always been miserable; but we've managed to create something entirely new in human history – an utterly miserable *ruling* class! I mean, there seems *no* excuse for that!