

Can Drugs Enlighten?

MARK EDMUNDSON

CAN DRUGS enlighten? Can drugs teach us anything that is worth knowing? In the current climate, these are questions rarely asked. There is little substantial academic discourse on the possibly edifying value of drugs. There is not much debate in the public forum about whether or not drugs can enhance and enlarge the mind. The legacy of the war on drugs is still with us.

But this may be changing. Marijuana is now legal in Colorado, Washington, Alaska, California, Maine, Massachusetts, Nevada, Oregon, and Vermont. As for hallucinogens, they too seem to be coming above ground after years of suppression. In February 2015, Michael Pollan published a piece in the *New Yorker*, “The Trip Treatment,” about sanctioned uses of LSD to treat patients near death and patients suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Pollan’s book about hallucinogens, *How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us about Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression and Transcendence*, has just been published. Is it possible that medical LSD is somewhere near the point medical marijuana was a decade ago? Perhaps hallucinogens are about to make a legal move into the culture at large.

It seems useful, then, to consider what value we should attribute to marijuana and hallucinogens, and what use they might have. In his brilliant book *On Drugs* (1995), David R. Lenson says that it might be better if young people (and, he suggests, all people) never took drugs at all. But they do and they will; there is no arguing with that. And since that’s the case, we need to know more than we do about drug experiences.

For example, do drugs have a transformational power? Can they change one’s life for the better? I mean the drugs that modify consciousness, the drugs that reshuffle the cerebral deck or maybe toss the old deck aside and supply a new one—something more like the

Tarot deck than Bicycle cards. I'm thinking of the drugs that were once said to expand consciousness. Is there such a thing as the expansion of consciousness? What would it mean to say that a drug had done as much for someone? And would it be in your interest, would it be in anyone's, to enlarge consciousness beyond conventional boundaries?

The question of how much one values mind-transforming drugs is tied up with another question, namely, how much does one value standard consciousness? If you like the way you think and feel and apprehend the world every day—or basically you see nothing wrong with it—then mind-shuffling drugs will only be of interest to you as a diversion, a form of recreation. And if all you are looking for is a high good time, the risks may not be worth it to you. Up to a certain point, alcohol is a predictable drug—it loosens up the judging faculty. It approves of what is going on inside your mind and outside in the world. Alcohol—up to a certain point—is a seal of approval. Pass that point and you do not know what will happen, and sometimes the surprises are worse than sinister.

LSD and weed change your mind. They do it in varying degrees, but they do it. LSD, we're told, can send people deep into mental illness—schizophrenia, bipolar disorder. Even weed has its downside, we're told. It can contribute to melancholia and depression; it can, as the doctors of officialdom tell you, “dis-incentivize.” That is, it can bring you to a point where you do not want to do much of anything but smoke and watch the world go by. What happened to those law-school applications? What happened to the plans for the European vacation? What happened to fixing myself something for dinner that's better than Oreos followed by milk followed by Oreos followed by milk?

For drugs to have transformational value one must look to them for transformation. One must look into them for the potential to change a life. You may read Plato. You may read Plato for diversion, to become well read, to do well (or not so badly) on a college exam. But if you do not read Plato to educate yourself, then you probably will not be educated by Plato. If you do not look to drugs to educate you, you will not be educated by drugs. If you think that they are for amusement, or for diversion, or you wish to do them so that you may

say you've done them, then nothing transforming is likely to emerge. But if one says, I will look at this and I will look into this and I will consider my experience as it goes on and consider it after it is over, well, only then is some kind of education—maybe even some kind of enlightenment—possible.

For education by drugs to take place, two things probably have to be true. First, the individual must have some skepticism about the value of conventional consciousness. He must feel that somehow, some way, he is not seeing enough, feeling enough—that his existence is being diminished by the inadequate use that he's making of his mind. He may feel that he has been in some manner brainwashed. He's locked within what Blake calls the "mind-forg'd manacles." He's been the unwitting subject of what Foucault calls discipline—discipline applied to the body, discipline applied to the mind. He must want to shake the cage that is conventional consciousness. He may even want to get out.

Then, too, he must believe that drugs could help him do so. He must feel that drugs could take him into a new level of awareness or intelligence. Maybe they could break a hole into the cave he and his fellows find themselves dwelling inside. Maybe a star would shine through, maybe a new moon or sun. A man or woman can be changed by a book or a movie or a painting or a drug only when deliverance is perceived as a possibility. You can listen to Socrates a dozen times on the street and nothing may happen. It is only when you realize that, yes, this Socrates is in fact a teacher, only then may you be taught and may you learn.

What might drugs teach? What might the smoking of a joint (in a legal zone only, I must insist!) manage to impart? "It might be one o'clock and it might be three/Time don't mean that much to me." Those are lyrics from a song called "Let the Good Times Roll," done by no end of bluesmen and rockers. (I prefer the Rolling Stones version personally.) Time don't mean that much to me. But time means almost everything to us, at least usually. Conventional consciousness is in part the consciousness of time: to be grown up is to take responsibility for one's being in relation to the clock that's on the wall or on the wrist or

embedded in the guts of the computer (or the guts of oneself). What does it mean to be in accord with time? It means showing up at the appointed moment; it means being reliable; it means organizing one's day; it means being on the clock. A friend once told me that as an eldest child it would be likely that I'd have a highly developed time sense. This is true: without a glance at the clock, I can usually tell you within a minute, two or three, what it says.

Who can believe that time sense is of no value? When I make a date to meet this person or that I'm gratified when he arrives *on time*. To be *on time* is to dominate time—be on top of it. When I show up to teach a class, I'm pleased that in front of me are rows of students—on time. Kant says that we impose our time sense on the world; it is a product of our minds and not something that inheres empirically in life. A man shall take of two things, Chaucer says, what he finds and what he brings. To Kant whatever we may or may not find, we bring the time sense with us.

Time is civilization, civilization time; but a mental habit that humanity developed to help negotiate experience may come to oppress us. We constantly feel the pressure of time. At my back, I hear "Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near," as Marvell says. He is presumably talking about the chariot of mortality. But time is not always so dramatic in its manifestations; sometimes time is simply the low burn and buzz of our obligations. It is the internalized rhythm that keeps us twitching anxiously when there is nothing really for us to twitch about. We are "on the clock" even when we try to relax and take it easy.

"Time don't mean that much to me": easy words to sing, but not so easy a state to experience. Can we enter into a zone in which time really doesn't mean that much to us? Well, yes, perhaps. Lenson says that pot smoking is about contemplation. It's about sitting and looking and being quietly, simply, and irrefutably amazed by the existence of this or that object. A flower, a bird, a painting, a leaf, a vase: these objects become intensely present, discrete, and amazing. Objects one by one are a miracle of existence. And this is so because we feel no particular hurry—or much less hurry—contemplating them when under the influence of pot.

Space—the space taken up by the object—has trumped time, the time of obligation and commitment. Imagine if we could live only in space without the attendant experience of time. No more sense of ambition; no more yearning; no more desire. In James Wright’s poem “Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy’s Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota,” he hears the sound of the cows as they amble back from the pasture, and he sees the horse droppings burn like gold in the sun, and up overhead a chicken hawk wings for home. He sees it all and it is *there*. The hammock, a place where you abide in transition between sleep and wakefulness, is Wright’s consciousness-altering vehicle: but the pot-like effects are familiar. The objects are discrete—he does not see them in relation to one another. They are discrete and they are *present*. They’re luminous in their status as objects of contemplation existing outside of time. “I have wasted my life,” says the poet at the close of the poem. The line is open to multiple understandings, but it seems to me that he’s saying that visions such as the one he is having have come far too rarely to him. He has been off looking for other things. He has been prey to desire, which always places you in time—I want that and here’s what I’ll do (as time unfolds) in order to get it. But here is perfection: with no effort involved, only the swing of a hammock, comparable to the rock of a cradle, Wright finds the experience of the infant who lives in a time before time.

Pot says no to conventional time, and poetry—at least as James Wright composes it here—can do so, too. If consciousness has become a ticking clock and preeminently that, then maybe it is time to slow the clock way down and stop it, so as to sample another way of living in which, for once, space trumps time.

To Lenson, the prevailing mode of contemporary consciousness is “consumer consciousness.” People buy in order to be. In this world, objects matter a great deal. But there is a special hierarchy of objects, the most important being those that the individual desires. Then there are the objects that he might desire; after that, a jostling collection of inconsequential items, which have, effectively, no consequential being. The world comes to life in consumer consciousness through the desire for possession. One cannot truly possess that leaf, that flower, that

blade of grass, that novel, that poem; and so they fall in importance. Though the individual may not always be in acquisition mode, that mode conditions the rest of his relation with experience. He will constantly be scanning the horizon for the buyable object, yes. But he will also transport the ethos of acquisition into other realms.

Freud, wholly self-conscious of how unpleasantly provocative he is being, liked to refer to the beloved of this or that individual as “the erotic object.” The person who is desired has been reconstituted in the mind (and spirit?) as an object to possess, assuming that all goes well. Freud is not thinking of consumerism per se, but he is nonetheless predicting its dynamics. Owning an object becomes the ultimate form of connection with it. To some there is no better or higher relation that one can have with an object than legal possession—and the human being (the beloved) can readily become an object of possession.

Karl Marx takes a protracted interest in the status of objects under capitalism. According to Marx, a bizarre reversal occurs in the capitalist world. Things take on the attributes of human beings; human beings, the attributes of things. There are other ways than the erotic way of treating a person as an object. You can put him to work for you and you can appropriate the fruits of his labor. To do so, you will probably have to suspend your sense of common humanity with him. You will not be able to think of your exploited workers as brothers or sisters. If you did, how could you treat them the way that you do? So, you will need to begin thinking of the person you have dehumanized as being, well, something less than human. You will consider her body as you would the body of a robot. You will consider his mind as you would the hard drive of a computer. You will not be able to extend full humanity to others, which will *alienate* you from them. It will make you more lost, isolated, and lonely.

To redeem this sorry state and to find some kind of meaning in your life, you will begin to see the objects that you own and the objects that you might own as crammed with meaning. They will appear to you as glowing, glamorous items that, once fully possessed, can fill life with significance. What, for instance, is an advertisement but an effort to confer exalted status—often something akin to human status—on

this or that inanimate thing? The object being advertised glows with light; it is radically *interesting* in the way a human friend can be; it adds texture and depth to experience in the way that a friend might. And one can own the object fully. It has no will of its own and therefore none of the capacity for complexity and unpredictability and (indeed) betrayal that a flesh-and-blood person possesses.

Lenson argues that under the influence of pot, objects become valuable as points of contemplation. Someone who is stoned goes around looking at things without the hunger to buy and possess them. Pot slows one down. Pot makes one look carefully. Pot gives one the feeling that one has all the time in the world. As Allen Ginsberg put it, “the marijuana consciousness is one that, ever so gently, shifts the center of attention *from* habitual shallow, purely verbal guidelines and repetitive secondhand ideological interpretations of experience to *more direct, slower, absorbing, occasionally microscopically minute engagement with sensing phenomena.*” Whether one calls this a shift from a higher to a lower level is an intriguing question. And whether one could possibly wish to inhabit pot consciousness all the time is also an open-ended matter. (How would you survive?) But it’s worth knowing that the spatial relations that pot consciousness develops may be at war with utilitarian and consumerist views of the world.

Pot gives one a rest, Lenson indicates. Pot cultivates the capacity to learn how to live otherwise. For some philosophers, contemplation is the highest form of human freedom. This is true of Plato of course, but in this case more relevantly true of Schopenhauer, who sees humanity as constantly bedeviled by what he calls the *will*. Will in Schopenhauer is hunger, desire, need; and will dominates almost all of us almost all of the time. The only time that we are truly free is when we are free of the pressures of the will. This can happen when we give ourselves over to compassion. And it can also happen when we surrender to our natural amazement at the beauties of art and nature. Schopenhauer is a Kantian, and he understands beauty as a quality that stimulates the disinterested play of the mind and liberates the individual from the pressures of the will, which Schopenhauer compares to being bound on the wheel of Ixion. The slavery of desire also

evokes the labor of Sisyphus rolling his grim boulder up to the top of the hill only to feel it slide from his grip as he reaches the top and roll down to the bottom again. For a desire satisfied is soon replaced by more desire, to the end of the individual's time on earth.

In the Kantian worldview, contemplative consciousness can deliver us from the slavery of desire. Radical spatial consciousness can deliver us from the tyranny of task-oriented, teleologically geared time. We live in an era of consumerism. If four-fifths of the world (let us say) is condemned to mechanical production under conditions that border on slavery, then the rest of the world, the privileged fifth, must do its business of consuming. If the world that is dominated by the computer rewards efficiency—being on time and in time—then our time senses must be sharpened to an almost lethal point. We must always know what time it is and how much time we have and how much time we have wasted and how much time we have left. We must, in short, become human timepieces, clocks with arms and legs.

Yet many do not wish it so: we will not become mere purchasers and we will not become adherents to the latest form of technological bliss. We seek forms of resistance. We demand modulations of consciousness that put us outside the reigning structures, or that at least allow us to sample an alternative. Is pot an education in contemplative, alternative consciousness? Lenson tells us that pot says simply this: the world is enough. It is enough without buying and owning. It is enough without trying to score. Being is a miracle. The consciousness of the drug—if we look at it as an instructive consciousness—brings us back to the great philosophic emotion: wonder.

You say you want a change of consciousness? (You say you want a revolution?) Then why not simply think differently? Why do you need the drug to turn the habitual mind's stone over and see what is beneath? There is the matter of conditioning. At school, we may learn to read and to write, but we also are penetrated by the disciplines of temporality and desire. We may confer space and time on the world, but the modes of space and time we confer are a matter of culture. They are a matter of education—they are a matter, sometimes, of imposed discipline. But when the conventional modes have

been instilled, they can still be contested. This, Lenson suggests, is what *higher education* is all about. Computers and clocks are a form of indoctrination, aren't they? Might it not be fair and just to try, if only once or twice (and in, to be sure, a legal zone, or under a legal trial program), to deprogram the machine?

But we have been talking about pot, a purportedly tame drug. About LSD, about hallucinogens, what is there to say? The first word must be this: Be careful! Be modest! Approach with fear and trembling if you approach at all. For here, if anywhere, is the god of the visionary drugs—a powerful, playful, joyous, whimsical god, who is also capable of cruelty and destruction. He lights up the world. He creates the bliss-filled apocalypse in the here and now, but he can exact a price. The princely deity of marijuana says that the world as given is enough—merely look. The god of hallucinogens says no to that. He creates a new earth and a new ocean and a new sky out of the latent powers of the human mind. He opens the door not to absorption, but to awe. He is the lord of fear and trembling. The eighteenth century's interest in the beautiful could have led to an understanding of marijuana consciousness. Hallucinogens are sublime to the point where they overwhelm the existing ideas that the philosophically fertile century gave to us about sublimity. The truly psychedelic drugs are wellsprings of joy and also of intense terror. Approach at your peril. Stand in awe of the god that is (maybe) your mind itself. Do not sign up for that trial unless you are ready to be tried, and perhaps found wanting. Even under official eyes and in the most controlled of circumstances, hallucinogens are perilous.

In an engrossing record of recent conversations, the programmatically highbrow critic George Steiner looks back into his life and broods on his regrets. One of them, surprisingly, is that he never tried LSD. "I had students who took it," Steiner says, "they told me the experience is indescribable." But Steiner, who can be bold enough intellectually, never took the drug. "I probably should have tried it myself," he tells his interlocutor, "but I was afraid to." I know what he means. I took LSD and psilocybin during college and shortly after, forty years

ago and more. The experiences were astonishing. But I would be most reluctant to take hallucinogens now, even if they were legal.

A crucial word to help us begin thinking about LSD and its affiliate drugs is *intensification*. The word is both useful and misleading. It is useful in that every aspect of experience is genuinely rendered with more force and more fervor under the influence of the drug. Colors are brighter, sounds deeper and fuller, thought is an experience so immediate that it seems physical, feelings pass as though they were weather fronts, every encounter with another being from a handshake to a discussion on the immortality of the soul seems to overflow with meaning. Meaning is everywhere. The entire world signifies—all things seem to recite their essences.

Intensification: yes, an apt word. But the intensification of an LSD experience often creates a difference not in degree but in kind. One inhabits a form of consciousness that is radically other than the habitual one. Pot consciousness is a slowing down, a focusing and relaxation of conventional mind. But LSD is an explosion of intelligence and sensing power. The world seems to be burning with immediacy; objects appear to be illuminated by inner flames. The experience can border on the apocalyptic; it is as though all that exists is making itself fully manifest, leaving nothing back, holding nothing latent, simply pouring its being forth without restraint. And this pouring forth can feel like the prelude to a radical transformation. Surely some revelation is at hand. Maybe it's the second coming, and the grace—or the wrath—is finally bursting forth.

Does hallucinogenic experience have values manifest or latent in it? Yes, I think so. The most common I know of is an intensity of felt distinction between what is alive and what is not. Human beings and animals and grass and trees and even water all take on an aura. They are alive and as such they are holy. But what is made of inert material does not partake in the same sacredness of being. It is profane. One might even say that it is tainted, unclean, polluted. Wood is not offensive, but plastic and concrete and tar and steel and iron, especially plastic, are: these forms can create a feeling of distaste that borders

on revulsion. One senses that they have come late to the earth; one feels an imperial and coercive agenda in them. They are there to exert man's domination over nature. They are dead and they have never been alive and this feeling of deathliness can be utterly demoralizing.

One needs to get outdoors. LSD seems to have an affinity with nature, for out of doors one feels free. The sky expands, the clouds are tumbling sheep, the sun is a jester laughing an unruly laugh, the fog is a protective cloak. Emerson walking on Boston Common must have somehow triggered hallucinogenic chemicals in his head. In the woods, he says, we return to reason and to faith. In the woods, no matter how many years are on my head, I am still a child. Emerson's mind is bathed in the infinite; his heart sings and all mean egotism vanishes. "I am nothing," Emerson says, "I see all."

"It's all too beautiful. It's all too beautiful." Those are the simple lyrics by a rock group called Small Faces describing a drug experience, maybe not literally LSD, though the words apply well enough. The song is called "Itchycoo Park." It's all too beautiful. *Beautiful*—yes. One sees as a god sees, sees as Apollo and Dionysus combined might. But there is an overwhelming quality to the experience: *too* beautiful. It is as though the mind is simply going to explode with the excess of joy, or that we do not have the emotional and intellectual resources to stand up to, experience, enjoy, and learn from the sights and sounds and thoughts that the drug (in tandem with the human mind) brings upon us.

Schopenhauer equated the experience of the sublime with the experience of danger. He thought that we felt sublime grandeur when some serious peril arose in proximity yet did not provoke terror. Perhaps the danger did trigger some measure of fear, but we were able to master it and hold our nerves steady. The experience of the sublime comes from a storm at sea, which is taking place at a safe-enough distance for us not to be truly threatened. But then the storm comes closer. We feel the bold wind on our faces; the rain slaps our coats and begins to streak the deck of our ship; the wind gives our craft a soft toss, then a not-so-soft. We lose our composure; we begin to feel not quite fear but anxiety. And now we can no longer be said to be having a

sublime experience; some crucial measure of our detachment is gone. We are moving away from the contemplative and into the fallen world of desire, in this case the desire to preserve ourselves.

But somehow, we rebalance. We see that the rain is now a whisper of rain and no more; the wind is actually playing with us, gently, gently. We recompose ourselves and once again we are in the midst of a pleasurable experience with danger at bay.

In the LSD experience, it is the mind that threatens to overwhelm itself. It is the mind and not the body that feels danger. There is simply *too much* experience flooding the faculties. Most of the time we can hold the threat in abeyance. It is all so beautiful. But sometimes the sheer force of the experience threatens to overwhelm. It is all *too* beautiful. Our minds may simply fail at the magnitude of what is at hand, as though a dike might burst and water, the most health-giving, life-giving substance, would become a force of destruction. When the mind is overwhelmed, can it ever recover itself? Or does it respond by hiding from the experience, making itself small and still, like a child clenched in a corner who will not come out? One thinks of Coleridge and the little child “upon a lonesome wild,/Not far from home but she hath lost her way:/And now moans low in bitter grief and fear,/And now screams loud, and hopes to make her mother hear.”

Then the question to all doctors now and to come: canst thou not minister to a mind diseased? LSD can overwhelm the conventional mind. It is a rebellious force that breaks through the barricades of common perception and creates a revolution in the mind and spirit. Some are prepared for this revolution, some not. But the risks are so great that one must think twice and twice again before taking the venture, no matter what clinical or legal guarantees have been proffered.

What is there, then, to be gained? Do LSD and its affiliates have an educating function? Surely the word *education* is too small to cover the case. It is as though one asked if war is education. War can be a teacher, I suppose. But the word education is far too tame. LSD is the mind not at war but at full exertion, allowing the universe to expand to its maximum apprehendable point. Is there teaching here? Blake's words are famous in this connection: cleanse the doors of perception

and the world will be revealed as what it is, which is infinite. “For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things through narrow chinks of his cavern.” But we are not talking only about cleansing. Mere washing of the windows isn’t what’s at stake here. What we have instead is the feeling of enormous wonder and the power of that which is real. Life is a miracle! That is the condensed teaching of the hallucinogen. And to bring it home—let this only be whispered—the drug allows you to feel temporarily as though you are creating that which you perceive. You are the god who is making this earth into a dangerous paradise. All that you see is an emanation of your mind.

Augustine taught that God did not create the world in one six-day stretch only. Rather he creates the world in an ongoing way: his love sustains that which *is* every moment. He bears the burden and possesses the joy of sublimely making the world. Coleridge, perhaps thinking of Augustine, perhaps not, talks about the primary imagination as the repetition of the infinite I Am. The LSD mind does not function like Coleridge’s poetic mind, which he calls the secondary imagination. It does not dissolve and diffuse and dissipate in order to recreate. No, it simply creates—or feels that it does. And it accordingly feels (what God may feel as well) that there may come the moment when it no longer has the strength to maintain that primary act of creation and that it may fall in on itself like a great cave full of diamonds and gold and artworks suddenly collapsing from the weight of its own wonders.

“By our own spirits are we deified,” says Wordsworth. It seems a glorious pronouncement. We can make ourselves see and feel as gods do through poetry and other motions of the mind. But if our “own spirits” are all we have to rely on, how readily may those spirits fail? How quickly might our poor primary imagination, locked in the rhapsodies of hallucinogenic being, not be able to perform the ongoing act of creation of the infinite I Am. Life is a wonder! Creation is a joy! The world is an amazement—on the largest scale. But when the mind staggers and the sun grows black and the mountains close in on us and the demigods that live beneath the earth or within the woods begin to chant our names in the rhythm of the songs of death—what then will

we do? This can be a sublime teaching. But is it a tutelage that we can always survive intact?

The mind on LSD is a giant slowly awakening to a fundamental truth: the enormous power of the individual is left untapped almost all of the time. We fear becoming all that is in us to be. We fear our own powers as individuals and so we tamp them down. We are in terror of being hated, being ostracized, being wrong. But a mind that can create what the mind on LSD does—what else might it do? What might it experience when it is fully conscious? “This is here all the time,” the voyager says to himself on the drug. He finds the world expanded as a creation of his consciousness. One might have access to these wonders at any time, if one had the strength. If the human mind can do all this, what more might it do?