



Review article

The epistemic innocence of psychedelic states



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ABSTRACT

One recent development in epistemology, the philosophical study of knowledge, is the notion of ‘epistemic innocence’ introduced by Bortolotti and colleagues. This concept expresses the idea that certain suboptimal cognitive processes may nonetheless have epistemic (knowledge-related) benefits. The idea that delusion or confabulation may have psychological benefits is familiar enough. What is novel and interesting is the idea that such conditions may also yield significant and otherwise unavailable epistemic benefits. I apply the notion of epistemic innocence to research on the transformative potential of psychedelic drugs. The popular epithet ‘hallucinogen’ exemplifies a view of these substances as fundamentally epistemically detrimental. I argue that the picture is more complicated and that some psychedelic states can be epistemically innocent. This conclusion is highly relevant to policy debates about psychedelic therapy. Moreover, analysing the case of psychedelics can shed further light on the concept of epistemic innocence itself.

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0. Introduction

The recent renaissance of scientific research into psychedelic drugs has provided evidence that these controversial substances can confer lasting psychological benefits in just one or two sessions. Small studies have found promising results using LSD and psilocybin to treat addiction (Bogenschutz et al., 2015; Johnson, Garcia-Romeu, Cosimano, & Griffiths,

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2014), obsessive–compulsive disorder (Moreno, Wiegand, Taitano, & Delgado, 2006), and anxiety relating to terminal illness (Gasser et al., 2014; Grob et al., 2011). This method is unlike existing psychiatric treatments in that it relies crucially on the temporary induction of a dramatically altered state of consciousness (Letheby, 2015), at least in some cases (Majić, Schmidt, & Gallinat, 2015). While in this altered state, patients often have extremely convincing experiences of what seems to be a mystical, immaterial ultimate reality underlying the universe, and there is some reason to think that these mystical experiences can be important for the therapeutic effects (Bogenschutz & Johnson, 2015; Majić et al., 2015). Indeed, one eminent scholar of religion has said that “the basic message of [these drugs is] that there is another Reality that puts this one in the shade” (Smith, 2000). This raises difficult questions. Michael Pollan, writing in the *New Yorker* recently, put it well:

*It's one thing to conclude that love is all that matters, but quite another to come away from a therapy convinced that “there is another reality” awaiting us after death . . . or that there is more to the universe—and to consciousness—than a purely materialist world view would have us believe. Is psychedelic therapy simply foisting a comforting delusion on the sick and dying?*

[Pollan, 2015]

In this paper I argue that even if psychedelic therapy is “foisting a comforting delusion on the sick and dying” it is not merely doing so. To make this argument, I rely on conceptual resources developed in epistemology, the philosophical study of knowledge. The philosopher Lisa Bortolotti and colleagues (Bortolotti, 2015a, 2015b; Bortolotti & Miyazono, 2015; Sullivan-Bissett, 2015) have recently introduced the concept of ‘epistemic<sup>1</sup> innocence’ to articulate the idea that certain epistemically sub-optimal states such as delusion and confabulation may have not just psychological but epistemic benefits. They urge us to resist a simplistic trade-off view according to which psychological benefits are purchased with epistemic costs. I apply their analysis to psychedelic therapy and argue that at least some psychedelic states are epistemically innocent imperfect cognitions.

I proceed as follows. In Section 1, I give a brief overview of psychedelic therapy: the history and phenomenology of these drugs and recent evidence for their therapeutic and transformative efficacy. In Section 2, I describe the concept of epistemic innocence and its application by Bortolotti to delusion. In Section 3, I argue that psychedelic states can have significant epistemic benefits. This discussion touches on some interesting issues arising from the fact that psychedelic states, unlike many other imperfect cognitive conditions, are voluntarily entered. In Section 4, I argue that often no alternative cognitions are available which will deliver the same epistemic benefits as psychedelics. In the course of making this argument, I highlight a potential ambiguity in the formal definition of epistemic innocence. Finally, in Section 5, I reflect on the implications of my discussion. The epistemic innocence of psychedelic states has broad consequences. Mounting evidence for the benefits of psychedelics is leading to a re-evaluation of the potential of these substances as tools in psychiatry and beyond (e.g. Sessa, 2005, 2008; Sessa & Johnson, 2015). I argue that such policy discussions ought to be based on a comprehensive understanding of the merits and demerits, epistemic included, of the drugs.

## 1. Psychedelic therapy: an overview

There has recently been a renaissance of scientific research into the effects of psychedelic drugs on human subjects in controlled conditions. Although more evidence is required, including replications with larger sample sizes, the results to date give us good reason to take seriously the idea that these drugs can durably change personality and alleviate psychiatric distress with just one or two administrations. In this section, I give a brief history of psychedelics, followed by a review of the recent evidence for therapeutic and transformative efficacy, in order to set the scene for my discussion of epistemological issues.

Sporadic earlier research notwithstanding, the story of modern psychedelic science really begins in 1943, when the Swiss chemist Albert Hofmann accidentally ingested a minute quantity of lysergic acid diethylamide or LSD-25, a chemical he had been developing for medicinal purposes. He famously described the result as follows:

At home I lay down and sank into a not unpleasant intoxicated-like condition, characterised by an extremely stimulated imagination. In a dreamlike state, with eyes closed . . . I perceived an uninterrupted stream of fantastic pictures, extraordinary shapes with intense, kaleidoscopic play of colours.

[Hofmann, 1980]

Shortly afterwards, it was recognised that LSD’s effects were similar to those of the naturally occurring substances mescaline, found in the peyote cactus, and psilocybin, found in ‘magic’ mushrooms. Osmond (1957) coined the term ‘psychedelic’, meaning ‘mind-manifesting’, to describe this newly recognised class of drugs with its distinctive profile of effects. The three drugs I have mentioned not only produce similar effects but act by a common mechanism: stimulation of serotonin 2A receptors (Halberstadt, 2015). Various other drugs which produce similar effects by different mechanisms of action have also been classified as ‘psychedelic’ (Sessa, 2012). However, here I restrict myself to discussing the so-called ‘classic’ serotonin 2A agonist psychedelics (apart from a brief mention of the NMDA antagonist dissociative anaesthetic ketamine, also currently being studied for its therapeutic potential).

<sup>1</sup> Where ‘epistemic’ simply means ‘of or pertaining to knowledge’.

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