Preface

Psychedelics are often claimed to yield profound insights. In fact, the very neologism "psychedelic" means, literally, "mind manifesting," a phrase that itself portends deep revelations about self and world. But there is a problem. It is notoriously difficult to articulate psychedelic insights with much specificity beyond a platitude or two, such as "everything is connected" or "it is all about love." While there is no harm in such ineffability per se, it is certainly curious from an educational point of view, because the very existence of the alleged insight would imply that some form of learning has taken place. Under ordinary circumstances where, say, I have figured out right triangles with the Pythagorean theorem ($a^2 + b^2 = c^2$) or ascertained the precipitating causes of the US Civil War, I can explain what I have learned in detail with lots of relevant examples of triangles and references to historical events. Yet psychedelic insight does not seem to work this way. Granted, there are copious "trip reports" that typically include plenty of detail about what people remember about their psychedelic journeys and what went on during them. Such psychonautical reportage can be inherently interesting—to the point that it represents an emergent online literary genre unto itself. As rich and suggestive as these first-person narratives may be, however, the morals of all these stories, the accounts of the "lessons learned" from them, seem disappointing by comparison, at best a kind of "you had to be there" situation. If it indeed represents genuine learning, why is psychedelic insight so comparatively ineffable?

One answer is that psychedelic insights are peculiar; they are different in kind. More, it is sometimes said they belong mostly to the religious and therapeutic realms and are therefore more like conversions on the Road to Damascus or psychological gestalt shifts that occur at

some meta-level; they enable new ways of thinking in a more holistic manner. This may be. Still, the question remains: What is the *educational* nature of these insights, where those claiming them indicate that they have learned something significant yet cannot communicate it very well? Experiencers can tell you at length about the wild happenings in the trippy "otherworld," but, again, disproportionately little about what exactly was gained and the ultimate significance of the adventures. For patients with trauma and believers with spiritual concerns, none of this might matter much, mental health and faith being their own rewards. If it works it works; articulating its specifics is a secondary matter at best. But what about those outside the concerns of therapy and religion? Say we stipulate what recent clinical studies worldwide seem to be showing, namely, that psychedelics are promising for alleviating a host of psychological debilities such as depression, PTSD, addiction, and even death anxiety among terminal cancer patients. And say we stipulate further that the "plant teachers" and "flesh of the gods" are integral to the religions and cultures of communities around the globe—and have been for millennia. But what about the vast majority of users of psychedelics in the modernist west not looking for a specific cure or to enact religious rites pertaining to a specific cultural lineage? What might they get out of it?

My question, then, is this: If one lacks a definable trauma or psychological condition and does not style oneself a spiritual seeker along religious lines, can one still learn from psychedelics? And, if so, if they can catalyze educational processes and effects not reducible to medicine and theology, can these be more fully described—beyond game but vague one-liners like those cited above? My goal in this book is to make headway toward answering these questions. As a predictable spoiler alert, let me be clear that it would be ludicrous for me to suggest I've found "the answers" to these hard questions. But I think more can be said than has been.

It is a humbling task, though, because psychedelia is dauntingly multidisciplinary such that no single researcher can pretend to anything close to comprehensive expertise. There are superstars in neuroscience, pharmacology, psychology, chemistry, botany, classics, anthropology, art, music, literature, religious studies, philosophy, and many other disciplines all making regular contributions. But nobody is truly a jack of *all* those trades. My own approach is philosophical in its basic orientation, meaning that it references many philosophers, uses philosophical terminology, and lingers over questions characteristic of that discipline. Despite the

need for interdisciplinarity, as a researcher, one must still be rooted in some intellectual tradition or other. And philosophy is not a bad one for investigating psychedelics: it opens possibilities for inquiry that are unique to it, and adjacent investigations seem to lead inevitably to deep and abiding philosophical topics such as the nature of the self, how we know what we know (if we know anything), what is real, and what is the good life for a human being. Though scientists get the grant money, philosophers certainly get more than our share of the best questions. Yet, like any other discipline, philosophy has its limitations as well. The days are long past when grand "systematizers" in the history of philosophy could posture as being above the disciplinary fray and pronounce to everyone else from on high. Rightly, nobody buys that anymore, especially the philosophers themselves. A healthy academic humility now comes with the territory.

So, on a multifarious topic like psychedelics, one does one's level best to recognize disciplinary limitations yet also incorporate relevant findings wherever they arise. Accordingly, despite philosophy being its leading element, this book is heavily informed by—and deeply indebted to—a host of other researchers in other disciplines and approaches. Early in my doctoral studies in philosophy, I was told it was advantageous to become "narrow but deep," that is, to strive to become the world's leading expert in some small niche: the philosophy of adverbs, Kantian aesthetics, or Plato's middle period (these three still being broader than optimal). Then one could truly be "original," a trailblazer, albeit of a tiny and pretty lonely technical footpath. On the nineteenth-century German university model of specialization and contemporary academia's realities of "publish or perish," this professional advice still makes good sense. With psychedelics, though, narrowness of this sort simply will not do. It would consign one's efforts to irrelevance and, even worse, an inexcusable dullness.

While flouting my early mentors' advice about narrowness, I aim to bring philosophical considerations to bear in two main ways: 1) making philosophical questions about the educative nature of psychedelic insight central to the present inquiry and 2) enlisting selected canonical philosophers from the western tradition to help illuminate the topics discussed. The first will be obvious throughout. As for the second, although other major thinkers like Plato are discussed in each of the book's sections, I specifically insert four "philosophical pathway" excurses into chapters 1–4 that feature, in turn, Martin Heidegger, René Descartes, Hans-Georg

Gadamer, and David Hume. Though psychedelics are not directly discussed by any of them, certain central theses of theirs turn out to be highly relevant. This is one of the main burdens of my argument and hopefully the reader will feel I have satisfied it by showing that these canonical philosophers can contribute a great deal to the discussion. In addition to the eastern and indigenous traditions that have tended to dominate discourse about psychedelics—providing unparalleled perspectives—it is also the case that the multi-layered western tradition also has copious resources for exploring the many philosophical questions that are raised. This should not be too big a surprise, as the usage of psychedelics is a cultural universal and a global inheritance; and as such, it generously invites many different approaches. One may certainly seek enlightenment from traditions far distant from one's own upbringing. From an educational point of view, it is salutary and enriching to engage in this kind of voluntary self-alienation.[1] But traditions closer to hand should not be neglected either. We should examine all of them and psychedelia should be claimed by *everyone* as a precious cultural inheritance that ties us to one another as well as to *each* of our distant pasts.

Technical Note

One technical note. This is hardly a work of neuroscience or pharmacology, but for clarity's sake, unless otherwise specified, by "psychedelics" I am indicating what are sometimes termed "classic psychedelics." This isn't really a scientific category but a convenient shorthand that cobbles together elements from neuroscience and chemistry with the histories and cultures of psychedelic usage; it is not a precise classification. Generally speaking, in terms of their neuropharmacology, the classic psychedelics are those that are serotonin (5-HT) receptor agonists (mostly, it is thought, at the 2A receptor, but sometimes others).[2] The family of classic psychedelics, my default meaning when using the term "psychedelics," are:

1. **psilocybin**, a.k.a. "magic mushrooms" (psilocin, 4-hydroxy-N,N-dimethyltryptamine, is the active agent, orally consumed);
2. **LSD**, a.k.a. "acid" (lysergic acid diethylamide, orally consumed);
3. **N,N-DMT** (N,N-dimethyltryptamine, usually inhaled but sometimes injected);

4. **ayahuasca** (DMT combined with a monoamine oxidase inhibitor, usually into a digestible brew);
5. **5-MeO-DMT** (5-methoxy-N,N-dimethyltryptamine, an agonist for the serotonin 1A receptor, usually inhaled);
6. **ibogaine** (12-methoxyibogamine, receptors and action mechanisms are various and not fully understood, orally consumed); and
7. **mescaline** (3,4,5-trimethoxyphenethylamine, active at multiple serotonin receptors, orally consumed).[3]

The first six of these belong to the tryptamine class or group of compounds, a reference to their basic chemical structure, while mescaline is a phenethylamine. Each of these drugs has both a natural source (counting LSD as a derivative of ergot, a naturally occurring mold [*Claviceps purpurea*] afflicting cereal crops, especially rye) and also exists as lab-synthesized analogs.

There are other psychoactive compounds discussed, some of them serotonergic and some of them not, that operate via both similar and different pathways, such as MDMA (3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine, a.k.a. "ecstasy" or "molly," and not really hallucinogenic but mood- and emotion-affecting), ketamine ((RS)-2-(2-chlorophenyl)-2-(methylamino) cyclohexanone, hallucinogenic and operating primarily on non-serotonin receptors), and salvinorin A (highly hallucinogenic with an absurdly long chemical name, an oddball agonist for the kappa opioid receptor).[4] But the seven listed above are the classic psychedelics, somewhat due to their internal properties and mechanisms of action but also somewhat because of their popularity and societal influence. Many others are perfectly legitimately called "psychedelics," such as the serotonergic compounds 2C-B (4-bromo-2,5-dimethoxyphenethylamine, like MDMA a phenethylamine) and DPT (N,N-dipropyltryptamine, a tryptamine), and many, many others—hundreds, at least, and, in principle, indeterminately many potential "designer" variations. But none of these is as common or has enjoyed the contemporary cultural impact of the listed seven.

In sum, while it is related to their chemical structures, the phrase "classic psychedelic" is an imprecise fusion of science and non-science; it is really just a lexical designator that has become popular through repeated usage. But for reasons of efficiency and economy of prose, it is hard not to use it (hence this note.) It is important to realize, though,

that classic psychedelics are just the tip of an indefinitely large chemical iceberg, with novel psychoactive compounds being synthesized and discovered constantly (so many, in fact, that even chemists must have trouble keeping up with them all). Also, the neuroscience of all of this is very young, very fluid, and so subject to alteration as more is discovered. It would be the soundest of wagers to bet on new breakthroughs regarding basic aspects of psychedelics in the years to come. Not even those with the highest levels of scientific expertise can yet speak with much confidence about the totality of what, at any level, is really going on here.