

DRAFT – not for distribution

Altered Consciousness After Descartes:

Whitehead’s Philosophy of Organism as Psychedelic Realism

By Matthew D. Segall

Altered Consciousness: An Interesting Subject for Study

Modern science and natural philosophy since Descartes have been saddled with the same problem: the measurable motions of matter and the invisible cogitations of mind appear to be of two entirely distinct ontological kinds. For this reason, the so-called “hard problem of consciousness” remains one of today’s most hotly contested scientific and philosophical frontiers.¹ In this chapter, I argue that finding a solution requires deconstructing the frame that creates the problem in the first place: understanding the place of consciousness in Nature first requires dissolving the problematic Cartesian framework that continues to shape contemporary research. I further argue that the philosophically informed chemical alteration of consciousness can aid in the dissolution of the dualistic frame by directly revealing the experiential inadequacy of Descartes’ rationalistically enforced mind-matter dualism.

After briefly reviewing the Cartesian residues in contemporary consciousness studies, I return to the origins of the problem in Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy* by analogizing his famous thought-experiment to a psychedelic trip. I show how Descartes’ “bad trip” helped lay much of the epistemological groundwork for the last several hundred years of modern techno-scientific thinking about external Nature and its relationship, or lack thereof, to a disembodied rational mind. Unfortunately, Descartes’ ingenious phenomenological demonstration of the necessary existence of an infinite divinity subtending both finite minds and Nature has been less enduring. Aiming to resuscitate this aspect of Descartes’ *Meditations*, I lean on the widely acknowledged “entheogenic” potential of psychedelics² while reimagining the nature of the divine ground in Whiteheadian process theological terms. There is much of value in Descartes’ meditative exercises, but especially in light of the evidence of psychedelic experience, his substance dualism must be critiqued and reconstructed in light of Whitehead’s process-relational philosophy. I argue that Whitehead’s organic reformulation of consciousness more adequately addresses and

¹ Chalmers. (1995). “Facing up to the Problem of Consciousness” in *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 2(3):200-19.

² That is, on their tendency to “generate the divine within” those who ingest them. See Pollan, Michael. *How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us about Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence*. United Kingdom: Penguin Books, 2019, 416. See also Griffiths, R., Richards, W., Johnson, M., McCann, U., & Jesse, R. (2008). Mystical-type experiences occasioned by psilocybin mediate the attribution of personal meaning and spiritual significance 14 months later. *Journal of Psychopharmacology*, 22(6), 621–632. See also MacLean, K. A., Johnson, M. W., & Griffiths, R. R. (2011). Mystical experiences occasioned by the hallucinogen psilocybin lead to increases in the personality domain of openness. *Journal of Psychopharmacology*, 25(11), 1453–1461.

incorporates the metaphysical significance of psychedelic experience, opening up the possibility of a *psychedelic realism* that allows consciousness researchers to take the ontologically revelatory nature of such experiences seriously.

While the Cartesian approach has left a deep imprint on contemporary science and culture, it is also the case that explicitly criticizing Descartes' mind-matter dualism has become obligatory for acceptance into the ranks of professional neuroscientists and philosophers of mind. With a few notable exceptions,³ most neuroscientists take it as a matter of course that one way or another the mind is ultimately reducible to brain activity. This is a paradigmatic assumption following from the materialist metaphysics undergirding contemporary neuroscience, rather than a scientific finding resulting from said research. Philosophers such as Daniel Dennett give voice to the metaphysical mainstream by arguing that consciousness is merely a "user-illusion"⁴ emergent from neural patterns. But recent ethnographic research has revealed how many neuroscientists, having convinced themselves that mind is illusory and that only matter is real, nonetheless continue to go on living their lives outside the laboratory as if they were genuine selves capable of meaningful thought and purposeful action.⁵ Cartesian dualism is thus proudly dismissed in theory only to be quietly reaffirmed in practice. As Whitehead once quipped, "Scientists animated by the purpose of proving that they are purposeless constitute an interesting subject for study."⁶

A major part of Whitehead's response to the modern "enfeeblement of thought"⁷ resulting from the incoherence of Descartes' substance dualism and its contemporary residues is his pragmatic and radically empirical method: whatever is found in practical experience must be integrated into our metaphysical scheme. If our scientific accounts of the nature of consciousness (whether ordinary or chemically altered) fail to include what in practice we experience and instinctually affirm, then our ontological categories are inadequate and require revision.⁸ The value of psychedelics for philosophy is precisely that the mind-altering, boundary dissolving, world-enchanting experiences they precipitate force the issue. Consciousness reveals itself to be less like the on/off switch for a ghost-like observer hidden somewhere inside the skull, and more like a transcranial kaleidoscope with a variety of experiential modalities, each revealing a new facet of reality. Our normal, culturally conditioned mode of consciousness provides us with only one rather

³ Such as neuroscientist Christof Koch, who argues for a panpsychist version of integrated information theory. See Koch, Christof. *The Feeling of Life Itself: Why Consciousness Is Widespread But Can't Be Computed*. United States: MIT Press, 2019.

⁴ See Dennett, *From Bacteria to Bach and Back: The Evolution of Minds* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2017), 222.

⁵ See Nicolas Langlitz. (2016). "Is there a place for psychedelics in philosophy?: Fieldwork in Neuro- and Perennial Philosophy." In *Common Knowledge* 22:3. See also *Neuropsychodelia: The Revival of Hallucinogen Research Since the Decade of the Brain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

⁶ *The Function of Reason* (Princeton, 1929), 9.

⁷ *Science and the Modern World* (The Free Press, 1967), 78.

⁸ *Process and Reality*, 13.

narrow aperture on the world. As William James famously argued, “no account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded.”⁹

As psychedelic chemistry made its way back into public consciousness during the twentieth century, cracks in the Cartesian firewall separating thinking selves from the rest of Nature grew wider. To draw upon Aldous Huxley’s famous example, shortly after drinking “four-tenths of a gram of mescaline dissolved in half a glass of water,” he turned to a vase of flowers in his study and began to perceive

“what rose and iris and carnation so intensely signified was nothing more, and nothing less, than what they were—a transience that was yet eternal life, a perpetual perishing that was at the same time pure Being, a bundle of minute, unique particulars in which, by some unspeakable and yet self-evident paradox, was to be seen the divine source of all existence.”¹⁰

Huxley goes on to describe a transformed perception of reality, his mind no longer enforcing abstract spatial categories such as Descartes’ geometrical extension upon the fractal textures of the enveloping world. Instead, he found himself “perceiving in terms of intensity of existence, profundity of significance, relationships within a pattern.”¹¹ As for time, Huxley’s experience metamorphosed into “a perpetual present made up of one continually changing apocalypse.”¹² Huxley came to view his sense of ego identity, not as the existential foundation of all scientific knowledge, but as a rather flimsy evolutionary survival strategy, important for navigating the external world of solid bodies, but impotent before the incomprehensible yet inescapable Great Fact of divine infinity scintillating just below the surfaces arrayed before our normal consciousness.

And yet, despite his transformed sense of self and spacetime, even the mescalized Huxley could not in the end escape the deeply enculturated sense of mind-body dissociation.¹³ While psychedelic experiences can open us to alternative realities, their character is also shaped by cultural expectations. Indeed, rather than questioning the epistemically tenuous and psychologically fragile nature of the skeptical ego, many modern neuroscientists interpret their own and others’ chemically altered psychedelic experiences of ecstatic dissolution of the mind-matter barrier as

⁹ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (United Kingdom: Modern library, 1936), 379.

¹⁰ Huxley, *The Doors of Perception*, 12, 18.

¹¹ Huxley, *The Doors of Perception*, 20.

¹² Huxley, *The Doors of Perception*, 21.

¹³ Huxley, *The Doors of Perception*, 52.

merely delusional. Worse, researchers from the beginning of the twentieth century through to the present day (Huxley included¹⁴) have claimed that psychedelic experiences provide an “artificial model of psychosis”.¹⁵ Some go so far as to say that psychedelic chemicals induce schizophrenia.¹⁶ Still others, such as the eliminative materialist Thomas Metzinger, take the even more radical step of reducing *all* experience, whether ordinary or altered, to a neurochemical hallucination.¹⁷

In contrast to such dismissals, Whitehead’s process philosophical approach allows researchers to take entheogenic consciousness seriously as revelatory of realities ordinarily hidden by our mistaken self-conception as skin-encapsulated egos (to use psychedelic philosopher Alan Watts’ favorite phrase). Psychedelic modes of experience tend to be emphatically participatory and incarnational in orientation and effect, terms inspired by Whitehead that I define later. So it is no surprise that the modern rational mind, first formed in the seventeenth century by Descartes’ doubting and disembodied imaginations, would tend to dismiss or pathologize such effects. But what if Descartes’ conjuration of a deceitful demon—and the ontological, psychological, and somatic alienation that has followed in its wake—is itself the paranoid hallucination? What if his doubting ego need not be our bedrock existential identity, but merely a knotted thought in need of metaphysical massage?

Set and Setting: Descartes on Mind, Matter, and God

In contrast to the depersonalized, objectifying techno-scientific methods of modeling Nature that he has inspired, Descartes’ original meditations took the form of an intellectual autobiography. Rather than publishing his philosophy as Scholastic disputations by tediously listing opposing pro and con arguments as had remained the custom up until his day, Descartes philosophized in a new key by aiming to rely only on what he himself had experienced to be true. His philosophical meditations were in this way more like spiritual exercises than logical arguments. “I have no business,” he tells us, “except with those who are prepared to make the effort to meditate along with me and to consider the subject attentively.”¹⁸ It is thus natural to analogize not only his own meditative experience, but also the reader’s experience of his textual account to the ingestion of a

¹⁴ Huxley, *The Doors of Perception*, 54-57.

¹⁵ Beringer, K., *Der Meskalinrausch*. (1927). *Seine Geschichte und Erscheinungsweise*. Monographie Neurol. Psychiat. H 49. Springer, Berlin, Heidelberg.

¹⁶ Paparelli, A., Di Forti, M., Morrison, P. D., & Murray, R. M. (2011). “Drug-induced psychosis: how to avoid star gazing in schizophrenia research by looking at more obvious sources of light.” *Frontiers in behavioral neuroscience*, 5, 1. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnbeh.2011.00001>

¹⁷ See Metzinger, *Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003). See also Langlitz, (2016). “Is there a place for psychedelics in philosophy?: Fieldwork in Neuro- and Perennial Philosophy.” *In Common Knowledge* 22:3, 377.

¹⁸ *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Translated by Michael Moriarty. (Oxford University Press, 2008), 101.

psychedelic catalyst: Descartes' text is an invitation to bracket our assumptions and follow him on a transformative journey beyond the edges of consensus reality.

Like many contemplative practitioners before him, and in alignment with the Whiteheadian psychedelic philosopher Terence McKenna's advice¹⁹, Descartes advocated social isolation and the withdrawal of the mind from the senses as preconditions for beginning the journey of discovery toward the truth. His method is a kind of soul spelunking, paradoxically affirming by inverting Plato's heliotropic allegory²⁰ by returning to the darkness of the cave, snuffing out his senses, and allowing his soul to adjust to the inner light of the eternal Idea, the infinite God-form upon which all finite things above and below will be found to depend. Descartes did not have access to a float tank such as that invented by psychedelic scientist John Lilly.²¹ Nor, for that matter, did he have access to LSD-25, psilocybin, 5-MeO-DMT, ayahuasca, or mescaline.²² In Descartes' case, wrapping himself in a warm winter gown and lounging in a comfortable armchair by the fire seems to have done the trick.²³ The set and setting of his epistemological method thus provisioned, Descartes councils us to let go of our long-held habits of thought so that we may plunge into the depths of the soul to there discover the unshakeable foundation upon which the entire edifice of scientific knowledge might be built.

Descartes initiates his meditations by trying to induce a state of confusion and anxiety in his readers, deliberately blurring the distinction between dreaming and waking consciousness, and between madness and sanity. He gazes out his window at people walking along the street below, questioning whether the hats and coats he sees belong to actual people or are just draped over automatons. He questions all his sensory experience, and even whether his knowledge of logic and mathematics may not be delusive. With his will securely anchored by an unshakable faith in God, his intellect is free to continue down the path of doubt without risking eternal damnation. Rather than doubt the existence of God "who is perfectly good and the source of truth," Descartes imagines instead a cunning evil demon who devotes all his effort to deceiving him:

¹⁹ See Gabriel, Trip. "Tripping, but Not Falling." *New York Times*. May 2 1993 (<https://www.nytimes.com/1993/05/02/style/tripping-but-not-falling.html>). "Mr. McKenna disapproves of taking hallucinogens, which remain illegal, for mere recreational purposes. He advocates they be taken in dark and quiet places in a spirit of exploration, in doses high enough to 'flatten the most resistant ego.'"

²⁰ See Plato's *Republic*, 514a–520a.

²¹ See *Neuropsychodelia*, 216.

²² Some have speculated, however, that Descartes experimented with cannabis, raising the specter of an untold psychedelic history of philosophy. See Richard Watson's *Cogito Ergo Sum: The Life of Rene Descartes* (Godine, 2007) and Frédéric Pagés' *Descartes et le Cannabis* (Mille et une nuits, 1996).

²³ *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Translated by Michael Moriarty. (Oxford University Press, 2008), 13. While this is the scene Descartes depicts in his *Meditations*, in his earlier work, *Discourse on Method*, he says the experience first occurred while he spent the winter in Bavaria in 1619-20 shut up in a "poêle" (literally, a "stove"), making the comparison with a float tank somewhat more apt. But most commentators agree this was just shorthand for a room heated by a tile stove (see *Discours de la méthode*. Translated by Etienne Gilson. France: J. Vrin, 1987, 157n11).

“I will think that the sky, the air, the earth, colors, shapes, sounds, and all external things are no different from the illusions of our dreams, and that they are traps he has laid for my credulity; I will consider myself as having no hands, no eyes, no flesh, no blood, and no senses, but yet as falsely believing that I have all these.”²⁴

Descartes admits that it is difficult to maintain an attitude of absolute doubt. Long experience and familiarity have all but enslaved him to assent to the evidence of his senses and customary habits of thought. He describes his reluctance to continue the exercise as like that of a prisoner who would rather sleep and dream of freedom than awake to find himself still locked in a cell. Nonetheless, he recommits to the experiment by continually reminding himself that everything he experiences is uncertain and potentially unreal. Even if he cannot in this way discover any truth, at least he will avoid being deceived.

At this point, there is no turning back. The only way out is through. Descartes has plunged himself into an epistemic whirlpool: “I can neither touch bottom with my foot nor swim back to the surface.”²⁵ A century and a half later, Kant would begin his *Critique of Pure Reason* caught in a similar web of perplexity, burdened by questions which he cannot dismiss, for they are essential to his own existence, but which he also lacks the power to answer.²⁶ Descartes, nearly drowning in doubt, flails about in search of something that the deceitful demon, Lord of Doubt, cannot touch. Having already convinced himself that there is nothing at all that is certain in the world, “no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies”, Descartes becomes increasingly dizzy as he is pulled down into the abyss. Finally, when doubt has twisted his mind nearly to the breaking point, he realizes in a flash of insight that *he himself must exist*, for who else could be deceived? The demon “will never bring it about that I should be nothing as long as I think I am something”.²⁷ The demon can torture my body, confuse my senses, and even delude my understanding, but *no demon could ever disavow me of myself*.

Descartes then first utters his famous statement, “I am, I exist”. It is not meant in this context as a mere logical proof. He is not deducing the necessary end of a chain of reasoning about experience. He is rather announcing the experientially verified free creation of an intellectual intuition. Descartes’ more commonly quoted “I think, therefore I am” does not occur in the *Meditations*. He

²⁴ *Meditations*, 16-17.

²⁵ *Meditations*, 17.

²⁶ *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated and edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge, 1998), 99.

²⁷ *Meditations*, 18.

phrases it in this more syllogistic way in other works for different audiences and purposes.²⁸ His statement in *Meditations* – “I am, I exist” – is more akin to a magic spell or spiritual incantation declaring his own existence under God.²⁹ It is an act of faith that is at the same time indubitable, functioning as an autochthonous nexus or ouroboric chiasm wherein the cognitive powers of willing and knowing (as well as their proper ends, the Good and the True) coincide and co-generate.

Descartes intends his Cogito to be taken as a finite reflection of the fact that we as human creatures are created in the image of an infinite divine Creator. That we are finite is obvious: we regularly err and are deceived. What is less obvious is that our very finitude and imperfection can be read as divine signs pointing us beyond ourselves toward infinite perfection. Descartes: “I am so constituted as a medium term between God and nothingness.”³⁰ I could not know myself in my finite existence as a thing amongst things unless I also had some idea of infinite perfection with which to compare myself. Descartes asks: *Where does this idea come from, if not from the infinite itself?* Surely, I, a finite creature, could not have implanted such an infinite idea in myself. For I am just its pale imitation. *I am* only because *God is*. I enjoy no thought or perception that cannot be doubted except *that I am, that I exist*. Only I am adamant enough to withstand the fires of demonic doubt, because I am myself a flame ignited by God. Every shape or colour or motion that dances before my mind’s eye can be melted like wax into the transparent idea-stuff of pure extension, while I remain inwardly untouched.

Descartes’ makes his point brilliantly. It cannot be doubted that whenever I am doubting, I exist. In this act of self-realization, I partake in my finite allotment of divine power as an *imago Dei*. *That I exist* is clear and distinct enough, but *what am I, exactly?* No ordinary image, surely. I am not anything extended, nothing shaped or coloured, or in motion through space. I am not anything sensed or imagined. Rather, for Descartes, “I am a thinking thing”.³¹ By “thinking” Descartes means to include not only abstract reasoning, but doubting, believing, understanding, wishing, imagining, and perceiving. I am not the thing thought, but the thing that thinks. I am a thinking substance. Outside and opposed to me is the extended substance of the physical bodies around me, including my own bodily organism. Descartes goes on to argue that the true essence of these

²⁸ See Descartes’ *Discourse on the Method for Conducting One’s Reason Well and for Seeking Truth in the Sciences*. (United States: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), 18; see also *Principles of Philosophy: Translated, with Explanatory Notes* (Miller, Valentine Rodger., Miller, R.P. Germany: Springer Netherlands, 2012), 5.

²⁹ See Jason A. Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (University of Chicago, 2017), 42. Josephson-Storm argues that Descartes’ method is “the popularization of a previously secret occult tradition.”

³⁰ *Meditations*, 39.

³¹ *Meditations*, 19.

external bodies is not perceived by the senses, which reveal only accidental secondary qualities, but by the thinking mind alone: “what I thought I saw with my eyes, I in fact grasp only by the faculty of judging that is in my mind”.³²

A charitable interpretation of his methodological discovery is that Descartes has successfully anchored scientific knowledge in his own thinking activity. But there is a good deal of epistemic sleight of hand in his maneuver, as he can just as easily be understood to have escaped the demonic whirlpool of skepticism by grasping hold of a rope dropped from heaven. Whether anchoring in himself or accepting God’s hand, Descartes’ *Meditations* helped to inaugurate the modern scientific research program. Nature was to be understood as a machine obeying mathematically determined laws of motion, and the human mind as set above and divinely pre-disposed with just the right ideas to reverse engineer it. Descartes proposed a divided world of two substances linked only by divine fiat. Contemporary scientific materialists may have done away with Descartes’ infinite divinity and finite mental substance, but they still unwittingly perform his mind-matter dualism and retain his representationalist theory of cognition. Representationalism is the theory of cognition which posits that mind (whatever it may turn out to be) comes to have knowledge of external material reality only through its own internal representations or ideas.³³ The apparent world we experience is thus at best a virtual one with no direct connection to the real world beyond us. Residually Cartesian representationalist accounts of cognition inevitably lead to claims such as Metzinger’s that all consciousness, whether ordinary or chemically altered, is hallucinatory. In this context, Whitehead complained nearly a century ago that “[s]ome people express themselves as though ... brains and nerves were the only real things in an entirely imaginary world”.³⁴

Whitehead’s Philosophy of Organism: Toward a Psychedelic Realism

Whitehead celebrates Descartes’ discovery that “subjective experiencing is the primary metaphysical situation which is presented to metaphysics for analysis,”³⁵ but he rejects Descartes’ substance dualism and representationalist mode of thought. Descartes’ concepts of mind, matter, and God must all be re-imagined. This section thus brings Whitehead’s metaphysical scheme into conversation with Descartes’ in search of a more concrete and experientially grounded account of reality, natural and divine.

³² *Meditations*, 23.

³³ For more on the anti-realism implied by representational accounts of human cognition, see Segall, M. T. (2017). Retrieving realism: A Whiteheadian wager. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 36 (1). <http://dx.doi.org/https://doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2017.36.1.39>

³⁴ *Science and the Modern World*, 91.

³⁵ Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (The Free Press, 1978), 160.

If Descartes' *Meditations* were just a bad trip, the solipsistic consequences of which he escaped only by recourse to a *Deus ex machina*, what other avenues might be open for a psychedelically-informed philosophy to re-imagine the place of consciousness in Nature? Whitehead's organic realism provides one especially promising route. In the wake of the perceived excesses of British idealism and the profound challenge to mechanistic materialism resulting from the early twentieth century revolutions in physics, Whitehead sought to construct a more adequate account of the human mind's relationship to a creatively evolving cosmos. In contrast to the Cartesian representationalist epistemology, which skeptically abstracts the knowing mind from the mechanical Nature it claims to know, Whitehead's organic, participatory, and incarnational approach reminds scientists that all their knowledge of Nature not only presupposes bodily engagement and energetic transaction with concrete natural processes, *their conscious knowing must itself also be an expression of these same energetic processes.*

While Descartes falls back on the absurdity of an omnipotent God who arbitrarily correlates the representations of our mind to the machinations of matter, Whitehead reconstructs the foundations of human knowing on *aesthetic*, rather than conceptual grounds. In other words, *feeling* becomes the basis of our cognitive powers, rather than disembodied reflection upon abstract ideas. Whitehead coins the term "prehension" to elaborate his new theory of knowing-as-feeling. On this theory, currents of unconscious feeling or *prehensions* are understood to pervade the physical world, with human consciousness being a particularly intense and elaborate form of contrasted feelings supported by the evolution of our complex nervous systems. Rather than conceiving of Nature as a collection of inert material particles, Whitehead reimagines the universe in light of twentieth century quantum and relativity theories as a *network of creative events*, wherein all events are *felt experiences*. Neither abstract isolated minds nor mechanically colliding atoms are what are finally real, but *occasions of experience* that vary widely in intensity.

Whitehead intends his novel, amphibious (i.e., both mental and physical) concept of prehension to replace Descartes' dualistic conception of mental representation. Prehension, rather than being a special capacity reserved solely for the mental substance of humans, is a process of feeling that bridges the bifurcated Cartesian categories of mind and matter. Whereas Descartes isolates mental cognition from physical causation, Whitehead's notion of prehension allows us to understand causation as itself the relaying of feelings from one occasion of Nature to the next. Our experience of the sun is thus not a private idea without intelligible connection to its astrophysical source, but the transmuted light radiating from an actual star.³⁶ In simpler entities such as hydrogen atoms, the

³⁶ *Process and Reality*, 76.

flow of feelings tends to be highly repetitive, which is why physics can describe their behavior with a great degree of mathematical precision (but even at this scale, descriptions of Nature can only be probabilistic). In more complex entities such as living cells, elephants, and especially human beings, the ability to creatively reinterpret the prehensive currents streaming into us from the world is dramatically enhanced. Replacing Descartes' abstract analysis of the attributes of two entirely unrelated kinds of substance with a more concrete analysis of experiential reality is the first step toward understanding Whitehead's metaphysical innovations. From Whitehead's point of view, if Descartes is right that "the enjoyment of experience [is] the constitutive subjective fact," then the old divided categories of mind and matter "have lost all claim to any fundamental character in metaphysics".³⁷ Our practical experience is intrinsically relational and purposeful: we feel we are in direct contact with a real world, not a mere representation of it, and we instinctively believe that our thoughts are effective in a world beyond themselves.

Rejecting the extremes of subjective idealism and objective materialism, Whitehead's organic realism is a protest against the modern "bifurcation of Nature" that for several centuries had enforced an incoherent division between "the nature apprehended in awareness and the nature which is the cause of awareness".³⁸ Rather than reducing our conscious perceptual experience to the status of a mere dream or hallucination that somehow floats, ghostlike, atop the conjectured reality of a mechanical Nature, Whitehead argued that "the red glow of the sunset should be as much part of nature as are the molecules and electric waves by which men of science would explain the phenomenon".³⁹ What modern science had thought of as a mechanical universe obeying fixed causal laws becomes instead an organic process of growth that, while conditioned by stubborn habits, is nonetheless uplifted by a principle of unrest whereby there is "creative advance" and "emergent evolution".⁴⁰

On Whitehead's reading, rather than a pre-existing subject qualified by its representation of an entirely alien mechanical world, our conscious thinking activity marks our participation in a vibratory flowing or "vector" transition between the subjective and objective poles of reality. As Whitehead describes it: "The creative process is rhythmic: it swings from the publicity of many things to the individual privacy; and it swings back from the private individual to the publicity of the objectified individual."⁴¹ In other words, rather than the thinking ego, or Cogito, remaining aloof from the world and alienated from its own body, Whitehead reimagines our consciousness

³⁷ *Process and Reality*, 159.

³⁸ *The Concept of Nature* (Cambridge, 1920), 31.

³⁹ *The Concept of Nature*, 29.

⁴⁰ *Process and Reality*, 229-230.

⁴¹ *Process and Reality*, 150-151.

as part of the same reality it is attempting to know. My thinking arises out of and perishes back into a cosmic network of creative events. Reality is not split in two but oscillates between subjective and objective phases of its becoming. It follows that humans are not the only thinking things in an otherwise dumb universe. Whitehead invites us to step out of Cartesian solipsism into a panpsychic cosmic process wherein everything becomes a kind of thinking thing, or better, an interrelated occasion of experience.⁴²

Whitehead's account of prehensive experience is meant to heal the "fatal gap" resulting from Descartes' representational epistemology, wherein the mind with its private ideas or mental symbols loses all intelligible connection with the physical entities supposedly symbolized. We are not "solitary substances, each enjoying an illusory experience"; rather, "we find ourselves in a buzzing world, amid a democracy of fellow creatures," reflecting the fact that experience necessarily involves "the self-enjoyment of being one among many, and of being one arising out of the composition of many".⁴³ Whitehead coins another neologism, "concrecence", to describe the process whereby a novel occasion of experience grows out of the composition of its prehensions of other entities.

Psychedelic Consciousness as "Immersion into God"

The history of philosophical inquiry as well as sound pedagogical practice dictate that first things are best saved for last. Creativity is Whitehead's process-relational alternative to the medley of other available metaphysical ultimates peddled by modern substance-based philosophies. Theists offer a totally transcendent God as their ultimate. Materialists prefer the pure immanence of mass or energy. In either case, the ultimate character of God or of Nature is assumed to be unchanging. God is eternal, already perfect, fully actualized; and matter, whatever else it may turn out to be, must be determinable without remainder in terms of some definite set of mathematical formulae. In contrast to such typically modern views, wherein what we are as conscious creatures is determined in advance by laws of Nature or divine decree, Whitehead's category of Creativity invites us to re-inhabit reality as an open-ended evolutionary adventure. Creativity signals our immersion into a no longer supremely mighty but eminently relational God, "the fellow-sufferer who understands"⁴⁴ what it is to be born and to die as a creature in a world of becoming. It is here that Whitehead's philosophy can be understood not only as a psychedelic phenomenology (as both

⁴² *Process and Reality*, 41. As Whitehead notes, Descartes himself equates feeling (sentire) to thinking in his *Meditations* (21).

⁴³ *Process and Reality*, 50, 145.

⁴⁴ *Process and Reality*, 351.

Lenny Gibson⁴⁵ and Peter Sjöstedt-Hughes⁴⁶ have skillfully suggested) but as *psychedelic realism*. Whereas philosophies of the Cartesian strain imagine both God and the human mind as transcendental onlookers upon a world in which they do not really belong, Whitehead reminds us of the “dim background” in our experience “from which we derive and to which we return”:

“We are not enjoying a limited doll's house of clear and distinct things, secluded from all ambiguity. In the darkness beyond there ever looms the vagueness which is the universe begetting us.”⁴⁷

In the Cartesian mode of thought, the entire environing world in all its concrete particularity, qualitative complexity, and aesthetic ambiguity is reduced to the uniform geometrical idea-stuff of *res extensa*. It is as though Descartes, in order to avoid drowning in doubt, found it necessary to transmute everything real between earth and sky into something ideal and thus more conceptually manageable. Descartes' method thus reduced Nature to the human mind's quantitative representation of it as mere extension, a geometrical grid. The vectors of feeling intrinsic to the organic life of the cosmos thus “degenerated into a mechanism entirely valueless” (except, of course, for those aspects of Nature that could serve as raw material for modern industry).⁴⁸

Whitehead's metaphysical intervention is not merely theoretical. The viability of human life on planet earth hangs in the balance. Though his dualism has been tremendously influential, Descartes cannot himself be blamed for the subsequent course of modern history, for the moral decay resulting from increasingly privatized minds or the ecological catastrophe resulting from the profit-driven extraction of vitality from Nature. After all, despite his insistent incredulity, Descartes never became unmoored from his Catholic faith in the infinite Creator of all finite minds and bodies. He did not foresee that our contemporary secular mentality would lead more and more people to view God not as a perfect and so necessarily existent Being, but as a fantasy projection.

Descartes' idea of God was that of *necessary existence*. God is that most perfect of all ideas, so perfect as to be unblemished by the defect of failing to actually exist. As was detailed above, Descartes reasoned that, without this divine essence or infinite God-form implanted in our souls

⁴⁵ See Gibson's unpublished paper originally presented at The Center for Process Studies in Claremont, California in August 1998, “Whitehead, LSD, and Transpersonal Psychology.” <https://www.lennygibson.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Whitehead-LSD-and-Transpersonal-Psychology-v1-1.pdf> (accessed June 3, 2020).

⁴⁶ Sjöstedt-H, *Noumenautics: Metaphysics, Meta-Ethics, Psychedelics* (London: Psychedelic Press, 2015), 33-58.

⁴⁷ *Essays in Science and Philosophy* (Philosophical Library, 1948), 123.

⁴⁸ Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, 195.

before birth, the reality of even our own consciousness of ourselves, not to mention our bodies and the surrounding world, could be doubted indefinitely, dissolved into the smoke and shadows conjured by a demonic imagination and deceitful suite of senses. To be fair, while Whitehead is critical of Descartes' unwarranted assertion of divine power, even he could not avoid invoking God, albeit a god of more relational and organic rather than substantial and mechanical form: "A recurrence to the notion of 'God' is still necessary to mediate between physical and conceptual prehensions" in Whitehead's scheme. "Conceptual prehensions" are more pronounced in complex animals and humans than they are in hydrogen atoms or rocks and can be understood as *anticipatory feelings of future possibilities*; whereas "physical prehensions" are *inherited feelings of the already actualized past*. Whitehead describes his God as akin to a cosmic poet, beckoning rather than commanding all finite actual occasions of experience toward the most beautiful possible future. God's power is thus won through *persuasion*, rather than coercion or the threat of punishment. In contrast to Descartes, Whitehead's process-relational notion of God as mediator of ideal possibilities does not function "in the crude form of giving a limited letter of credit" to our representational knowledge of Nature.⁴⁹ Without Descartes' divine insurance policy, consciousness might be nothing but illusion, human persons nothing more than machines driven mad by the thought that they are more. Descartes argument from perfection fails, in Whitehead's view, because "it abstracts God from the historic universe" and because it neglects the evident fact that "we and our relationships are in the universe."⁵⁰

For Whitehead, God is not merely an abstract idea to be believed in, proven, or refuted. Nor is the reality of my living body and the surrounding world of other organisms a mere conjecture for a doubting ego to ponder and pass judgment upon. In a Whiteheadian universe, it would be more accurate to say that we exist as members of God's body, and that God perceives the world through our consciousness. Indeed, the naive way in which Descartes imagines his mind's association with his body is not unrelated to the failure of his argument for God's existence. I am not merely accidentally related to my body. In Whitehead's view:

"Our bodily experience is the basis of experience...our feeling of bodily-unity is a primary experience...so habitual...that we rarely mention it. No one ever says, Here am I, and I have brought my body with me."⁵¹

⁴⁹ *Process and Reality*, 49.

⁵⁰ *Modes of Thought* (The Free Press, 1968), 155.

⁵¹ *Modes of Thought*, 156.

Nor is my body merely accidentally related to its world: my body is in fact “only a peculiarly intimate bit of the world,” and its experiential functioning is the starting point for all my knowledge about that world.⁵² Mind and body constitute a complex unity with the world, the living body functioning as a “complex amplifier” that inherits and interprets the world as a network of self-organizing feelings.⁵³ God, now incarnate in the historic universe, becomes the primary experiential fact granting the very possibility of inter- and intra-bodily orientation, the aesthetic lure latent in the nature of things that goads each ever deeper into relationship with all. I exist by virtue of God’s immersion into me.⁵⁴ In this sense, Whitehead is in agreement with Descartes that, though we are rarely conscious of the fact outside of certain states of grace or without chemical catalyzation, “the perception of God [is] prior to that of myself.”⁵⁵ But rather than making God the world’s solitary supreme Judge and the guarantor of all scientific knowledge of a merely mechanical Nature,⁵⁶ Whitehead invokes a process-relational divinity and way of knowing compatible with our incarnate existence within a “democracy of fellow creatures.” God becomes the Eros initiating each moment of experience and the Beauty shining through all of them in concert. God is the endlessly reiterating process of compositional concrescence whereby many become one and are increased by one: “The world lives by its incarnation of God in itself”.⁵⁷

Just as the world gains its life through divine incarnation, Whitehead suggests that God achieves consciousness only through relationship with the finite creatures of the world. We are thus participants in the divine nature, co-creators rather than passive creations. Sjöstedt-Hughes speculates that psychedelic experiences allow us to attain heightened awareness of this participatory reality. We do not become God so much as vector into God: “It is an apotheosis qualified by symbiosis”.⁵⁸ Shortly after his mescaline-induced apotheosymbiosis with the infinite beauty enfolded in a vase of flowers, Huxley reflected upon how psychedelically catalyzed ego dissolution grants us “an obscure knowledge that All is in all – that All is actually each”.⁵⁹ For Huxley, this perennial wisdom was as close as the finite mind could ever come to perceiving everything that is happening everywhere in the universe. It is akin to Whitehead’s incarnational

⁵² *Process and Reality*, 81.

⁵³ *Process and Reality*, 119.

⁵⁴ Sjöstedt-H, *Noumenautics*, 50.

⁵⁵ Descartes explains the reason: “For how could I possibly understand that I doubt, and that I desire, that is, that there is something lacking in me, and that I am not completely perfect, if there were no idea in me of a more perfect being, by comparison with which I could recognize my own shortcomings?” (*Meditations*, 33).

⁵⁶ Whitehead refers to Descartes argument that an all-powerful God secures the veracity our judgments as “the crude form of giving a limited letter of credit to a ‘judicium’” (*Process and Reality*, 49).

⁵⁷ *Religion in the Making* (Cambridge, 2011), 149.

⁵⁸ *Noumenautics*, 51.

⁵⁹ *The Doors of Perception*, 26.

and participatory rendering of Descartes' notion of divine perfection, which is rooted in "our sense of value, for its own sake, of the totality of historic fact in respect to its essential unity":

"For example, take the subtle beauty of a flower in some isolated glade of a primeval forest. No animal has ever had the subtlety of experience to enjoy its full beauty. And yet this beauty is a grand fact in the universe. When we survey nature and think however flitting and superficial has been the animal enjoyment of its wonders, and when we realize how incapable the separate cells and pulsations of each flower are of enjoying the total effect – then our sense of the value of the details for the totality dawns upon our consciousness. This is the intuition of holiness, the intuition of the sacred, which is at the foundation of all religion. In every advancing civilization this sense of sacredness has found vigorous expression. It tends to retire into a recessive factor in experience, as each phase of civilization enters upon its decay."⁶⁰

If our troubled civilization is to flower again, it may depend upon a reinvigoration of this sense of holiness underlying our everyday consciousness. I have argued that Whitehead's psychedelic realism has an important philosophical role to play in catalyzing such a renewal. In addition to offering a novel reframing of the place of consciousness in a no longer bifurcated Nature, Whitehead critiqued the professionalized university system and put forward educational and research programs inclusive not only of specialized training in mathematics and science, but also of "aesthetic growth" in the capacity for "intuition without an analytical divorce from the total environment".⁶¹ For philosophers like Whitehead, still attuned to wisdom's original calling, learning can never be just the memorization of facts and figures. The aim of all human learning must be to increase our ability to appreciate "the infinite variety of vivid values achieved by an organism in its proper environment".⁶² The proper environment of the university is the universe. By cultivating Whitehead's sense of relational organic value in our research, contemporary philosophers might finally come to heal the metaphysical divide between mind and Nature first solidified in the seventeenth century and unwittingly reproduced by contemporary neuroscience's residually Cartesian understanding of consciousness. Psychedelics are not a required ingredient in this pursuit, but given the proper set and setting, they may serve as potent metaphysical medicines.

⁶⁰ *Modes of Thought*, 164-165.

⁶¹ *Science and the Modern World*, 199.

⁶² *Science and the Modern World*, 199.