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Entheogens

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All languages grow together with the peoples who speak them, borrowing or inventing terms to keep pace with what is new and retiring others when they are no longer needed. When the recent surge of recreational use of so-called “hallucinogenic” or “psychedelic” drugs first came to popular attention in the early 1960s, it was commonly viewed with suspicion and associated with the behavior of deviant or revolutionary groups. Apart from the slang of the various subcultures, there was no adequate terminology for this class of drugs. Words were manufactured, and in their making they betrayed the incomprehension or prejudice of the times.

Out of the many words proposed to describe this unique class of drugs only a few have survived in current usage. It is the contention of the authors who have subscribed their names to this article that none of these terms really deserve greater longevity, if our language is not to perpetuate the misunderstandings of the past.

We commonly refer, for example, to the alteration of sensory perceptions as “hallucination” and hence a drug that effected such a change became known as an “hallucinogen.”¹ The verb “hallucinate,” however, immediately imposes a value judgment upon the nature of the altered perceptions, for it means “to be deceived or entertain false notions.” It comes from the Latin *(b)al(l)ucinari*, “to wander mentally or talk nonsensically,” and is synonymous with verbs meaning to be

delirious or insane. It appears, moreover, to have been borrowed from the Greek, where it is related to a group of words that imply restless movement and perplexed excitement, such as that caused by grief and despair. How can such a term allow one to discuss without bias those transcendent and beatific states of communion with deity that numerous peoples believe they or their shamans attain through the ingestion of what we now call “hallucinogens?”

The other terms are no less damning. During the first decade after the discovery of LSD, scientific investigators of the influence of these drugs on the mental processes (most of whom, it is clear, had no personal experience of their effects) had the impression that they seemed to approximate deranged and psychotic states. Hence the term “psychotomimetic” was coined for a drug that induced psychosis. Psychology, which is etymologically the study of the “soul,” has until recently concerned itself only with mental illness and aberrant behavior, and all of the terms formed from the *psycho-* root suffer from this connotation of sickness: psychotic, for example, cannot mean “soulful.” Osmond attempted to avoid these adverse associations when he coined “psychedelic,”² the only word in English that employs the anomalous root *psyche-* instead of *psycho-*, in hopes that this term, as distinct from “psychotomimetic,” might indicate something that “reveals the soul.” However, not only is “psychedelic” an incorrect verbal formation, but it has become so invested with connotations of the pop-culture of the 1960s that it is incongruous to speak of a

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shaman's taking a "psychedelic" drug. It is probable, moreover, that even its anomalous formation cannot isolate it from confusion with the *psycho-* words, so that it suffers from the same problem as "psychotropic," which tends to mean something that "turns one toward psychotic states" instead of merely toward an altered mentality.

We, therefore, propose a new term that would be appropriate for describing states of shamanic and ecstatic possession induced by ingestion of mind-altering drugs. In Greek the word *entheos* means literally "god (*theos*) within," and was used to describe the condition that follows when one is inspired and possessed by the god that has entered one's body. It was applied to prophetic seizures, erotic passion and artistic creation, as well as to those religious rites in which mystical states were experienced through the ingestion of substances that were transubstantial with the deity. In combination with the Greek root *gen-*, which denotes the action of "becoming," this word results in the term that we are proposing: *entheogen*. Our word sits easily on the tongue and seems quite natural in English. We could speak of *entheogens* or, in an adjectival form, of *entheogenic* plants or substances. In a strict sense, only those vision-producing drugs that can be shown to have figured in shamanic or religious rites would be designated entheogens, but in a looser sense, the term could also be applied to other drugs, both natural and artificial, that induce alterations of consciousness similar to those documented for ritual ingestion of traditional entheogens.

NOTES

1. "Hallucinogen" and "hallucinogenic" were first used in print by Donald Johnson, an English physician, in a pamphlet entitled *The Hallucinogenic Drugs* (Christopher Johnson, London, 1953). Johnson, however, borrowed the term from three American physicians, Abram Hoffer, Humphry Osmond and John Smythies, who did not use it in print until the following year.

2. In a letter to Humphry Osmond dated 30 March 1956, Aldous Huxley proposed that mescaline be called a "phanerothyme." Huxley penned the sprightly lines:

To make this trivial world sublime,

Take a half a gramme of phanerothyme.

Osmond replied with the following ditty:

To fathom Hell or soar angelic,

Just take a pinch of psychedelic.

Much of the credit must go to Ralph Metzner and Timothy Leary for popularizing "psychedelic." In the spring of 1963, the premier issue of *Psychedelic Review* was published in Cambridge, Massachusetts, under the editorship of Metzner, Osmond and Leary, among others. *Psychedelic Review* is now defunct, but the term is perpetuated by the title of the present *Journal of Psychedelic Drugs*. Huxley's odd term did not fare so well. From Huxley's letter it is clear the word meant "soul-manifester" to him. Greek *thymos*, however, means "organ of passion, temper and anger," and "phanerothyme" would indicate a drug which made intense emotions manifest.