

BREAKING CONVENTION: ESSAYS ON PSYCHEDELIC CONSCIOUSNESS

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A MATTER OF SPIRIT: AN IMAGINAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE PARANORMAL

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It is encouraging to see the current academic interest in therapeutic properties and usages of psychedelics and psycho-active plants. Sociological methods of quantitative data analysis and scientific investigation into the physiology of altered states of consciousness (ASC) are challenging negative and prohibitive attitudes and contributing to a general re-evaluation of legal constraints regarding their use. However, despite the undoubted importance of such research, there is one aspect of the ASCs which arise from hallucinogenic ingestion which remains outside the epistemological framework of conventional approaches, namely the evaluation of the *ontological reality* of the visionary experiences.

It is this dimension which interests me, for when a scientific-materialist paradigm is dominant, the question of the numinous and revelatory content of non-rational states of consciousness is inevitably marginalised or even ignored. This is to a large extent due to the polarity between rational and metaphysical epistemologies which has become intrinsic to post-enlightenment thinking and the resulting hegemony of the critical and analytical model of etic research. Often, the only thing that can be said of overwhelming visionary experiences is that they are

personal, mystical, transcendent, or transformative. Individuals may relate their visions with vivid narrative, describing enhanced colours, strange beings and situations perceived in ways that are impossible to articulate. But for those firmly anchored in the sense-perceptible reality of this world, it is easier to focus on 'how' such visions are achieved in physiological, neurological or mechanical terms than on 'what' is being revealed, and why.

This is not to deny the value of phenomenological approaches by researchers who are open to the possibilities of autonomous beings existing on multiple levels of consciousness¹⁻⁵ but often their accounts are presented with a pragmatism which belies the ontological chasm between this world and the 'other'. Unless we acknowledge that our normal ways of knowing may be inadequate for shedding light on these dimensions there is always the danger of the *reductio ad absurdum*—for example the identification of the other-than-human as the all-too-familiar alien or UFO from outer (physical) space. More often, the attempt to explain other-worldly events results in their dismissal as either hoaxes or hallucinations.

I would like to suggest a way of redeeming the authenticity of visionary experience from both the scepticism of a literalist, physicalist mentality and the 'infra-subjective reductionism' which is characteristic of modernist approaches to 'personal' spiritual experience.⁶ Another mode of speaking is required to illuminate realms that lie beyond scientific discourse and to do justice to the lived experience of encounters with other worlds; one which does not attempt to explain or subsume them into its own preconceptions, but which engages with their ontological ground on its own terms. To illustrate such a mode, I will draw on the observations of the Sufi mystic Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi (1165-1240), who speaks from a tradition of Islamic mysticism deeply infused with neoplatonism.

Neoplatonic epistemology arises out of a unitive yet hierarchical vision in which human consciousness partakes of both cosmic and divine intelligence in a variegated whole characterised by degrees of quality of *being*, all emanating from a primordial energy source termed the One.

Most importantly, it differentiates between various subtle conditions of 'knowing' which link the human soul with corresponding realms or dimensions of existence, from the most material and earthy to the most rarefied and 'spiritual'.

Each condition of being has a mode of perception appropriate to it, and humans are simply the most material manifestations of a panoply of intelligences which include elemental, aetherial and angelic spirits. The cognitive faculty which enables humans to apprehend these 'higher' planes of existence is termed, by Plato, the intellect. This is not intellect as disembodied rationality, but rather an intuitive *connection* of understanding; a resonance of the deepest stratum of the mind with its original ground of being. As such, it transcends the possibilities of rational thinking.⁷ For the neoplatonist Plotinus the imagination came to play a distinctive mediating role between sense perception and intellectual understanding. Such an imagination is not to be confused with 'fantasy' or mere distortions of sense-impressions of 'this' world, but is a faculty which produces mirror images of archetypal or spiritual realities.⁸ vol. IV,9

I suggest that the study of visionary and paranormal phenomena would greatly benefit from a metaphysical perspective that acknowledges the role of this 'higher' imagination in revealing knowledge of another order entirely from sense-perception or reason. Such a perspective would provide an integrative model for both mystical and rational epistemologies. Reinstating the imagination as the mode of perception which mediates between the two will facilitate insight into the nature of visions whose origin is non-sensible. One could argue that this is also a function of the visual arts, in which images may open up layers of meaning inaccessible to the rational mind. Indeed it is precisely this power of the symbolic which needs to be evoked in any methodology harnessed to the deeper understanding of 'paranormal' visionary experience. I hope the reasons for this will become clear.

Let us now approach the question of the ontology of 'altered states' with Ibn 'Arabi. In his *Meccan Illuminations (Al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya)* he describes and theorises about his own encounters with spirits or jinn:

*One embodied himself to me in the earth,
another in the air:*

One embodied himself wherever I was,

Another embodied himself in heaven.

They gave knowledge to me, and I to them,

Though we were not equal,

For I was unchanging in my entity,

But they were not able to keep still.

They assume the form of every shape,

Like water taking on the colour of the cup.^{11 p83}

These spiritual intelligences are mobile, changeable entities which may appear as embodied in both outer 'objective' reality and 'internal' visions, but whose autonomous existence is unquestioned. The cosmology within which Ibn 'Arabi locates these beings is threefold, following the fundamental Platonic distinction between the material and spiritual worlds and placing a middle realm, corresponding to the visible cosmos, which links heaven and earth. Here we are presented with a symbolic image that reflects 'one world' in which the tripartite, harmonious structure is mirrored in the human soul as a microcosm. Each realm can be known via its corresponding cognitive faculty; the material world is known through sense perception, the intermediate world — the world where sense-perception and spiritual reality meet — through the imagination, and the spiritual world is 'unveiled' to the intuitive intellect. This is what leads Ibn 'Arabi to place emphasis on the idea that the soul has two eyes: the eye of reason, which deals with 'human' affairs and empirical/rational knowledge, and the eye of revelation which sees into the divine world through its images, giving us access to it via visible forms. This metaphor suggests a parallel with left and right brain hemisphere functions.¹²

Post-enlightenment epistemology has firmly separated these two forms of vision, exalting the former to the status of indisputable truth and relegating the latter to mere 'subjectivity' or 'belief'. Yet, in neoplatonic thinking revelation precedes and informs both sense-perception and

reason. It is primary, disclosing truthfulness and meaning which is then subject to interpretation:

Revelation is a meaning. When God wants meaning to descend to herself-perception, it has to pass through the Presence of Imagination before it reaches sense-perception. The reality of imagination apprehends that it gives sensory form to everything that becomes actualised within it [...] If the [revelation] arrives at the time of beingfulness, it is called 'imaginationalisation' [...] that is why revelation begins with imagination.^{11 p75}

The imagination, then, is able to conceive immaterial meaning through clothed with an image: "the degree of imagination embraces that of sense perception and meaning. Hence it subtilises the sensory object and deepens its meaning."^{13 p15} Perhaps the nearest most people come to experiencing this is through the kind of dream where people and objects manifest as fully embodied and tangible and is startling in its sense of heightened reality. Ibn 'Arabi suggests that such visions do indeed partake of two realities, as Chittick explains:

[I]magination] brings spiritual entities into relationship with corporeal entities [...] By giving incorporeal realities the attributes of corporeal things [...] imagination allows unseen realities to be described as possessing attributes that pertain to the visible world [...] Unseen things actually take on visible form in the imaginal alms.^{11 p73}

These 'unseen things' are discarnate intelligences, which may exist at many levels of non-material being. The earth is inhabited by human beings whose essence is simple and luminous, and the intermediate world whose essence is simple and material, and the intermediate world whose essence is simple and luminous, and the intermediate world by the spirits or Jinn whose essence is paradoxically both simple and embodied. In this medial place, spirits may appear as embodied uses of the metaphor of a mirror-image to describe the ambiguity of the imaginal realm, for material things seen in a mirror are paradoxically

its identity as an embodied deity.¹⁵ Chittick proposes four constituents of spiritual vision: the consciousness of the observing subject, the reality-status of the observed, the form it takes, and the location of its actualisation. Firstly, the observer may be either awake or in an ASC. If awake, the 'eye of imagination' may see an apparition, invisible to anyone else, possessing full material form to the observer. But this is not a hallucination in the pejorative sense, rather, to the neoplatonic understanding the observer is seeing into a dimension whose ontological status as 'real' supersedes our notions of reality. This 'ontological inversion'¹⁶ is impossible for the physicalist to grasp, and exposes the inadequacy of conventional empirical research methods. Despite the apparent concreteness and tangibility of these visions, they belong to a different modality of matter. Without a three-world metaphysics providing a foundation for the ontological reality of non-material being, it is difficult to locate the direct encounter with it in terms of its significance and transformative effect.

Ibn 'Arabi describes two kinds of ASC in which spiritual encounters take place: in dreams, or in a state of 'absence' of the soul (or 'annihilation' of the self/ego), where it is experienced as leaving the body and abandoning the world of the senses. Angels, jinn and humans may all undergo 'imagination', or manifest themselves in their subtle bodies, for in neoplatonic pneumatology, the imagination is both an attribute of the subtle or astral body and the means by which it is perceived.^{17,18} Humans who manifest in this way may be either alive or dead, for the highest part of the soul-energy of the embodied human is retained in the spiritual world and rejoined after death. Thus it is possible to 'see' as real someone hundreds of miles away, or who has died. The imaginalised entity may be fully sense perceptible — but again one must emphasise that this does not mean it belongs in our world or is subject to its laws. Thus it may instantly vanish, or appear as non-human, angelic, or even monstrous and alien. Similarly, the apparition's location will depend on which 'eye' is seeing it:

The imaginal being perceived by the eye of sense-perception would be

both fully real yet fully unreal at the same time.¹¹ However, it is important to remember that although spiritual presences may appear to have 'broken through' into sense-perceptible reality, they, in fact, inhabit a fundamentally different ontological reality and are therefore immune to the laws which govern our material world.

Ibn 'Arabi explains that these imaginal beings can be seen through two different 'eyes'; the wakeful eye of sense-perception, and the eye of the imagination which, in most people, sees only during sleep and other ASCs. However, it appears that certain individuals may also see with the imaginal eye during wakefulness and then the veil between the two worlds falls away: "the person who undergoes unveiling sees while he is awake what the dreamer sees while he is asleep."^{11, p84} Such refined souls will be able to distinguish between embodied spirits and humans by a 'mark' of identification, on which Ibn 'Arabi does not elaborate further. Presumably such a mark would be obvious to those able to discern it, but as Chittick points out, "the Shaykh could live joyfully in the knowledge that he recognised the mark of every apparition. The rest of us, lacking in marks, had best be careful."^{13, p85}

The ability to distinguish more advanced spirits from those still attached to the material world is of utmost importance. Often the 'lower' jinn will play tricks or deceive with illicitly obtained knowledge from higher realms. Thus the sitter is advised to be on his guard.¹¹ How seriously are we to take this advice? It is relatively easy to deliberately create situations in which autonomous beings may be encountered, whether through psychedelics, mediumship, hypnosis or meditation. But we have lost a sense of what medieval scholastics called *adaequatio*: that the intellect of the knower must be adequate to the thing known to perceive its truth.¹⁴ Spirit phenomena will reveal themselves through sympathetic resonance with the participant's own desire, intention, and 'psychic' capacity. The more earth-bound the consciousness, so the spirit. This explains the importance of spiritual training and specific ritual contexts to cultivate a purity and refinement of soul that attracts higher beings. Such was the central aim of neoplatonic theurgy, whose rites culminated in the 'divinisation' of the human soul as it fully realised

located 'out there' in the world of *discontiguous imagination*, while the being perceived by the eye of *imagination* would be 'in here' in the world of *contiguous imagination*.^{11 p89}

This suggests that it is not the spiritual beings who change location, but rather it is a matter of *how* they are seen; which 'eye' is looking. They can be perceived as either external or internal to the subject. In fact it is impossible to apply temporal-spatial concepts to this ambiguous and paradoxical realm, for 'inner' and 'outer' have no meaning in non-spatial dimensions. In practice, the *daimonic* or spiritual intelligence (particularly in channelling and mediumship) confounds attempts to define it as either a psychological condition or an autonomous being.¹⁹ As the fifteenth century Platonist Marsilio Ficino reminds the reader, "our daemon and genius is not only, as is thought, our intellect, but [also] a numinous being (*numen*)."^{20 p515}

It is very easy to confuse the discontiguous imagination with the material world if the eye of revelation is not active. Corbin relates an anecdote by Ibn 'Arabi of the Prophet Muhammed seeing the Angel Gabriel in the form of a beautiful Arab youth, whereas his companions saw only the youth.²¹ Some imaginal embodiments apparently have the power to leave a concrete impression or even object in our world, but according to Ibn 'Arabi this can only be achieved if the human medium is an enlightened sage. The common sorcerer may be able to conjure objects that are not fully and concretely embodied, and they would soon disappear.¹¹ One is reminded here of the apports and ectoplasmic materialisations in contemporary mediumship, which attain various degrees of objectivity and physicality.^A

Ibn 'Arabi's own encounters with spirits fall into three categories: when he alone could see the apparition, when it could possibly be seen by others, and when it was definitely seen by others. For example, in 1202 he encountered the spirit of a holy man, Ahman al-Sabit, who had died 400 years previously. Ahman appeared as a beautiful man who seemed to pass through the bodies of other walkers as Ibn 'Arabi was circumambulating the Kabbah:

My mind was turned toward him and my eyes were upon him, lest he slip away [...] when he had completed his seven turns and wanted to leave, I seized hold of him and greeted him. He returned the greeting and smiled at me. All this time I did not take my gaze off him fearing that he would slip away from me. For I had no doubt that he was an embodied spirit, and I knew that eyesight kept him fixed.^{11 p94}

The idea of 'fixing' the spirit through the quality and direction of perception implies that the human gaze allows a spirit to take form, although Ibn 'Arabi emphasises that there is no disjunction between the outer form and the spiritual essence of the apparition "even if it is found in a thousand places, or in all places, and is diverse in shape."^{11 p94} Once the gaze is released and the spirit moves, it may instantly disappear.

The 'imaginisations' which appear in our world are therefore anomalous, ambiguous and paradoxical. As Ibn 'Arabi points out, they are "neither entirely existent or non-existent, neither entirely known or unknowable, neither entirely affirmed or denied."^{22 p4} Yet they inhabit a very real dimension, and "It is to something like this reality that each human being goes in their sleep and after their death" where the observer "sees [moral and spiritual] qualities and characteristics as self-subsistent forms that speak to him and with which he converses, as being [human] bodies without any doubt."^{22 p4} Corbin calls this realm the *mundus imaginatis*, "a precise order of reality, corresponding to a precise mode of perception... a world as ontologically real as the world of the senses."^{23 p19} This world's cognitive faculty is the active imagination, which, Corbin warns, must not be confused with "the imagination that modern man identifies with 'fantasy', and that, according to him, produces only the 'imaginary'."^{23 p9}

As we are unfamiliar with the neoplatonic premise that visibility of spiritual phenomena is entirely dependent on the observer's *quality of perception*, we can conclude that not everyone will have opened their eye of revelation. This raises the problematic question of empirical evidence and its assessment. With modern technology it is possible to obtain a permanent, apparently 'objective' record of spirit activity. I

would suggest, however, that such 'evidence' (whether as photographs, film or recordings) is highly problematic because (fraud aside) it presents phenomena as objectively 'real'; of the same ontological status as tables and chairs. It is then very easy for 'the eye of reason' to insist on a rational explanation or fall prey to Kant's 'surreptitious concept' whereby numinous revelations are subjected to the same 'positive thought' as material objects.⁸ Unless the limitations of sense perception and rational thought in relation to spiritual events are acknowledged, their truth will remain in the realm of speculation or subjective opinion, their manifestation baffling and therefore ignored or explained away. Objective proof belongs in the world of empiricism and is therefore an impossible criterion for the realm of spirit to fulfil.

To sum up, it is vitally important that research methodology acknowledges the interdependence of the researcher's mode of perception with what he or she sees and how it is evaluated. A framework for paradigms of knowledge beyond the rational should be established. Psychical research should become open to metaphysics, spiritual hermeneutics and the power of imaginal perception in order to gain access to a dimension beyond social context or objective analysis. Ambiguity and paradox accompany manifestations of the 'imaginal' in this world, and the right approach may not be 'either or' but rather 'both and'. Phenomena would be subjected to a multi-levelled investigation that recognises the differing discourses of sensory, rational and imaginal perspectives, and how they mutually inform each other. I conclude with the neoplatonist Proclus, who explains that whenever a faculty of knowledge is used to judge something beyond its remit, it will render itself ineffectual: "all knowledge when conjoined with an object of knowledge which does not at all pertain to it, loses its power."²⁵ Thus if rational thinking is applied to mystical or visionary experience, it will simply negate its own integrity. This is why I suggest that the human sciences can never be adequate for examining the reality of ineffable visions, and why researchers into the ontology of ASCs might benefit from recognising the authority of 'super-rational' modes of cognition.

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- A. The 'psychic' explanation given for apparitions is that spirit energy can change the vibration of matter so it can pass through other matter, and then re-solidify.¹⁰
- B. For a discussion of Kant's epistemological stance with relation to the paranormal, see²¹.