

Dante's Divine Comedy and Psychedelic Therapeutics

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Abstract

Psychedelic medicines are emerging into mainstream healthcare and offering promising new treatment options. The neurosciences provide an understanding of the biomedical actions of psychedelics but are more limited in their ability to comprehend the phenomenological aspects. These subjective experiences are better mirrored in theology, in the traditions of the world's indigenous cultures, and in the imaginative expressions of great art and literature. This essay focuses on Dante's *Divine Comedy* - an epic poem that chronicles a healing and transformative human journey. In this exploration, we examine the correspondence between Dante's literary masterpiece and the process of psychedelic therapy while also considering the ontological challenges that arise when attempting to integrate diverse forms of knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

As psychedelic medicines re-emerge into mainstream healthcare, they are offering novel and potentially transformative therapeutic processes. Ketamine, a psychedelic-like anesthetic, is in current clinical use ^[1], while 3,4 methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA) and psilocybin are progressing towards clinical approval - having demonstrated efficacy in conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder ^[2], treatment-resistant depression ^[3], alcoholism ^[4], and end-of-life distress ^[5]. The neurosciences are providing a rapidly evolving understanding of the biomedical actions of psychedelics ^[6] and new perspectives on functional brain activity ^[7]. However, the sciences are more limited in their ability to engage and understand the phenomenological aspects of psychedelic therapeutics. These subjective experiences are better reflected in the theological disciplines ^[8], the traditions of the world's indigenous peoples ^[9], and in the creative arts - including great literature ^[10].

This essay will explore the *Divine Comedy* - written by Dante Alighieri in the early 14th century - an epic poem that chronicles a healing and transformative human journey. A particular focus will be on the Earthly Paradise - an important transition point coming

two-thirds of the way through the journey - and a place where psychedelic neurophenomenology aligns with the visionary depth of Dante's poetry.

A BRIEF PRELUDE TO THE EARTHLY PARADISE

The *Divine Comedy* begins when Dante realizes he has lost his way in life. He finds himself in a dark wood - adrift and in despair. Initially, Dante tries to relieve his anguish by escaping the dark woods - but finds his exit blocked. Responding to Dante's distress, the poet Virgil appears and advises that a shortcut to healing and wholeness is not possible. Virgil then guides Dante on a long and necessary psychospiritual journey.

Dante and Virgil first descend into the dark, tortured hopelessness of the Inferno. The souls in the Inferno are unconscious of the manner in which they participate in their own suffering. They abdicate responsibility for their agony, harshly cast blame onto others, and thereby perpetuate the eternal recurrence of the same misery and affliction.

Next, the poets undertake the arduous, cathartic, and liberating ascent of Mount Purgatorio. Entry into the Purgatorio requires the assumption of responsibility for one's condition and a commitment to development and

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change. The sufferings in the Purgatorio are often similar to those in the Inferno. However, there is no externalization of blame, and progress towards resolution becomes possible. As each cornice of the Mount is traversed, there is increased clarity and unburdening.

THE EARTHLY PARADISE AND PSYCHEDELIC NEUROPHENOMENOLOGY

After considerable effort and challenge, Dante and Virgil reach the summit of Mount Purgatorio and enter a sacred wood – the Earthly Paradise. The Earthly Paradise is a place of extraordinary beauty but also of extraordinary demand. First, Virgil announces that he is unable to guide Dante any further and must entrust him to another. Filled with grief at the loss of Virgil, Dante witnesses a great pageant – and the arrival of Beatrice – who will now assume the role of guide. Upon meeting Beatrice, Dante is overcome with emotion. She has long been his muse and the object of his unrequited love and longing. Dante somewhat clumsily attempts to engage Beatrice in the ways of conventional love. But Beatrice casts her eyes upward - away from the limitations of personal relating and towards the heavens - foretelling the next stage of the journey - entry into the Paradiso.

Before Dante can enter the Paradiso, he requires additional preparation. Beatrice directs that he should drink from the stream of Lethe – the water of oblivion. Dante is led into the stream, submersed, and drinks deeply. The waters of Lethe erase Dante’s autobiographical memory and the ingrained assumptions of his historical past. He is propelled into a non-ordinary state of consciousness and is able to perceive the depth and beauty of creation anew. He gazes into Beatrice’s eyes and observes the reflection of the gryphon – a mythical union of a terrestrial beast and aerial bird – and a symbol of the

simultaneous presence of the earthly and the divine. As Dante perceives the gryphon’s dual nature, he is awestruck, uplifted, and edified.

“Think, Reader, think how marvelous and strange
It seemed to me when I beheld the thing
Itself stand changeless and the image change ^[11].”

Like the waters of Dante’s Lethe, psychedelic medicines induce alterations of consciousness that allow for novel perceptions of oneself and the world. Through their actions on the brain’s default mode network ^[12], they similarly disrupt autobiographical memory and attenuate the familiar sense of identity shaped by personal history. Along with increased brain network integration ^[13], this supports an expanded state of awareness that often includes profound experiences of a spiritual or mystical nature.

The experiences evoked by Lethe and by psychedelics represent states of mind that support healing. But the state evoked by Lethe is incomplete, and the psychedelic state is transitory. In order to metamorphose these transitional states into more enduring traits, additional measures are needed.

THE STREAM OF EUNOE AND PSYCHEDELIC-ASSISTED PSYCHOTHERAPY

Beatrice is bemused by Dante’s condition after drinking from Lethe. She notes that the absence of memory prevents a fully transparent accounting of his life. After administering a mild rebuke for this state of amnesic denial, Beatrice directs Dante to drink from the stream of Eunoe – the stream of good remembrance. In so doing, Dante is restored – he remembers all – but his recollections are now unyoked from the emotional burdens of

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shame, bitterness, and regret. Instead, there is acceptance and forgiveness – resulting in a sense of renewal.

“From those holy waters born anew
I came, like trees by change of calendars
Renewed with new-sprung foliage
through and through
Pure and prepared to leap up to the stars [14].”

With this foundation, Dante is now prepared to engage in the final stage of the journey – entry into the mystic realm of the Paradiso.

Dante's experience with Eunoë finds an analog in psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy [15] – a paradigmatically distinct form of treatment that utilizes psychedelic medicines to activate endogenous healing and facilitate the therapeutic process. This method diverges from monocausal etiologic theories [16] that predominantly rely on biomedical explanations for emotional suffering. Instead, there is an acknowledgment of the multi-level phenomenology of human experience and an inclusion of the expanded states induced by psychedelics. Challenging psychological and emotional issues that emerge in the course of psychedelic treatment are anticipated and processed therapeutically. In tune with Dante's Eunoë, the treatment process often includes the recovery of suppressed memories, emotional unburdening, a sense of renewal, and, not uncommonly, a focus on experiences of an existential or spiritual nature.

THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL CHASM AND ONTOLOGICAL CONUNDRUM

The original title for Dante's masterpiece was simply the *Commedia*. The adjective *Divine* was added after Dante's death to acknowledge the spiritual relevance of his masterwork. Similarly, the emergence of

psychedelic treatment has moved questions about spiritual relevance into mainstream medical conversations. Research is demonstrating that the mystical states induced by psychedelic medicines are associated with positive outcomes in both clinical [17] and non-clinical [18] settings. However, integrating these discoveries into established conceptual frameworks has proven to be challenging and has stimulated debate - with some arguing for the importance of subjective psychedelic experiences [19] and others arguing against [20].

The lack of consensus regarding the spiritual and mystical states induced by psychedelics is not surprising or new. While it typically evokes a call for additional research, it also highlights the long-standing differences in the epistemologies and ontologies that undergird the sciences, the arts, and theology. To accumulate knowledge, science relies upon rational analysis, experimentation, and empirical evidence - the arts upon creative expression, subjective experience, and aesthetics – and theology upon faith, philosophical reasoning, and personal spiritual experience. An integration of these diverse sources of knowledge is one of the important challenges that the field of psychedelic therapeutics faces.

THE CHALLENGE OF INTEGRATION

As psychedelic therapeutics move into the mainstream, they are increasingly aligning with the rational-empirical approach of the medical sciences. This approach is well suited to an understanding of the biomedical aspects of psychedelic therapeutics but is less well-equipped to understand expanded states of consciousness. In the sciences, there is often a default to physicalism – an ontological orientation that restricts reality to the physical and material. From this perspective, spiritual and mystical experiences are typically

understood to be strictly epiphenomena of altered brain function.

However, some in the scientific community have questioned the objective foundation for physicalism and have advocated for a more expanded metaphysical and empirical framework [21]. One potentially instructive framework is the unfolding dimensionality of consciousness proposed by the philosopher Jean Gebser [22]. Gebser's research has provided cultural and historical evidence for the evolution of Western consciousness through discernable stages that he labeled archaic, magic, mythical, mental, and integral. In Gebser's view, the rational-empirical approach to knowledge is a function of mental consciousness. It is a structure of consciousness with the capacity to apply sequential logic, linear causality, and critical cognition. While the mental structure affords considerable benefits - such as the rational and empirical foundation for the scientific method - it also can become deficient. For instance, when the open inquiry of science constricts into scientism - the belief that rational and empirical knowledge is the only valid form of knowledge.

The situation becomes more nuanced when considering non-rational forms of knowledge - such as imagination, creative inspiration, or mystical experiences. In Gebser's model, the archaic, magic, and mythical structures emerged prior to the mental structure and support non-rational experience and knowledge. There is a valid concern in the sciences that engaging non-rational modes of cognition might regressively loosen the rational and evidence-based foundations for understanding. However, rather than rendering non-rational phenomena unwanted or irrelevant, Gebser proposed that their integration is fundamental to a new and emerging consciousness structure - a structure he labeled integral. The integral structure maintains the benefits of rationality while seeing through its exclusivity. It integrates the non-

rational structures, resulting in a more complex and multi-dimensional structure of consciousness. Writing in the mid-20th century, Gebser provided extensive examples of the emergence of the integral structure across diverse fields of human endeavor, including the natural sciences, the sciences of the mind, the social sciences, and the arts²³. For the nascent field of psychedelic therapeutics, Gebser's integral perspective holds promise. It offers an approach that can integrate complementary sources of knowledge - such as Dante's visionary poetry, with the discoveries of contemporary neuroscience.

CONCLUSION

As psychedelic therapeutics enter mainstream clinical care, we are presented with transformative treatment possibilities. Concurrently, we are challenged with comprehending the full range of experiences induced by psychedelics. Great works of art, such as the *Divine Comedy*, have the potential to aid comprehension by broadening our field of exploration and understanding. This is not contrary to the principles of science. Rather, it aligns with the entreaty of Sir Frances Bacon (1561-1626), a founder of the scientific method:

“The world is not to be narrowed till it will go into understanding.... but the understanding to be expanded and opened till it can take in the image of the world as it is in fact [24].”

In accordance with Francis Bacon, Dante's masterwork supports the process of expansion and opening. It invites interdisciplinary integration and extends the boundaries of inquiry - to include expanded states of consciousness and the limitations of conventional conceptual frameworks.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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