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Metaphysics and mushrooms: Psychedelics can change how you think about the universe

Research shows that psilocybin leads people away from materialism and toward transcendentalism. Apparently, mushrooms teach metaphysics.



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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that deals with “being.” A new study finds that a single trip on a psychedelic can cause lasting changes in a person's metaphysical beliefs. Overall, people moved away from "hard materialism" to more transcendental, idealistic, and supernatural views of the cosmos.

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Scotty Hendricks

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After decades of being shunned, psychedelics are enjoying a biomedical renaissance because many of them show great promise in treating a variety of mental health conditions when used in tightly controlled environments. Now,

a new **study**, soon to be published in *Scientific Reports*, claims that psychedelics can change a person's beliefs about metaphysics.

Of metaphysics and mushrooms

Everyone has metaphysical beliefs, even if they are unaware of them. For example, many people have an intuitive belief in **mind-body duality** (that is, the mind and body are separable) even if they have never heard of the term. These beliefs are often associated with certain behaviors as well, with dualists **taking less care of their bodies** than physicalists, who argue that the mind is part of the body. Similar relationships between metaphysical beliefs and human behavior can be found elsewhere. Those who believe in free will are less likely to lie, cheat, and be aggressive.

Sharpening one's understanding of metaphysics can be accomplished with various methods, such as meditation. Near death experiences often do the same. One commonly discussed but less investigated method is psychedelic drug use. While many anecdotes suggest that psychedelics cause people to adopt a non-materialist view of the cosmos, hard data was lacking. After all, it could just be that those already predisposed to idealism — the notion that fundamental reality is mental rather than physical — are also more likely to try these drugs.

In the first attempt to confirm and quantify these effects, a team of researchers led by Dr. Christopher Timmermann of the Centre for Psychedelic Research at the Imperial College London gauged the metaphysical stances of several hundred people before and after they tripped in a ritualistic setting.

Psychedelic use is associated with less belief in materialism and more belief in transcendentalism. (Credit: Christopher Timmermann et al., PsyArXiv, 2021)

Philosophy, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll

The study came in two parts. In the first, nearly 900 volunteers who signed up to attend a psychedelic ceremony were recruited to answer a series of questions — for instance, on realms of existence — aimed at determining their baseline metaphysical beliefs. After the ceremony (in which psilocybin was used), the volunteers were asked to complete the survey again four weeks and six months later.

In general, users reported moving away from belief in materialism or physicalism — that is, the idea that the universe is primarily physical rather than mental or spiritual — and toward other views such as transcendentalism, non-naturalism, or idealism. Effects were seen at both four weeks and six months, and the effects were largest for those who were taking the drug for the first time. Another important change was the drift from hardline stances of any kind toward more mixed or moderate views. Participants also reported improved mental health.

The clinical trial was similar but involved only 60 participants. Half were given escitalopram (an antidepressant) and the other half psilocybin. The results were largely the same, with the psilocybin group experiencing a shift away from hard materialism toward more transcendental, idealistic, and supernatural conceptions of the universe.

Overall, the psychedelic experience moved people away from a “hard materialist” view. However, regardless of belief (in materialism or dualism), people tended to moderate their views after taking the drug — as if psychedelics made people more tolerant of uncertainty.

Caveat emptor

In an email to BigThink, Dr. Timmermann summarized the findings by explaining:

“...[t]hat we provide evidence for the first time that psychedelics shift beliefs concerning the nature of reality. These beliefs are central to the way human beings organize society and may correspond to deeply rooted worldviews. Specifically, we found that people rejected the notion of physicalism (the idea that the world is made up of material, as opposed to mental or spiritual things) after a single psychedelic experience, endorsed the notion of fate more, and also the idea that all things in the universe are conscious, what we call panpsychism. Importantly, we found that these changes were related to improvements in mental health.”

The authors note that it is beyond the scope of the paper to draw any conclusions regarding which metaphysical system is best for mental health. They do speculate that very stringent beliefs of any kind about metaphysics are unhealthy. Finally, the authors advise that future studies involving psychedelics warn participants that their worldviews may be altered by their participation. Caveat emptor: Acid might change your perspective on panpsychism.

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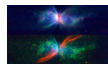
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