Book Review

Philosophical Encounters with Plant Spirits and DMT Entities: A Review of *Altered Perspectives: Critical Essays on Psychedelic Consciousness*

Alberto Cavallarin [a, *]

[a] Tilburg School of Catholic Theology, Department of Religion and Practice, Tilburg University, The Netherlands

Sam Woolfe's Altered Perspectives: *Critical Essays on Psychedelic Consciousness* (2024) is a significant contribution to what we might call the "philosophy of altered states of consciousness". Philosophical interest in psychedelic and "weird" experiences in general is far from new. Depending on how we define philosophy, this interest might be as old as humanity itself. In the past century or so, however, philosophical reflection on these states gradually lost its diversity (or its credulity, depending on who we ask). Following the foundational work of scholars like William James and Walter Stace, and following the more recent "psychedelic renaissance", the secular debate was eventually monopolized by one category of extraordinary experiences: mystical experiences.

Although *Altered Perspectives* certainly contributes to this ever-expanding literature, Woolfe should be included among those attempting to push contemporary philosophical analysis beyond mystical states. Specifically, he seems interested in reintroducing strangeness into the conversation on psychedelics, without letting it derail into gullibility. Inspired by his own psychedelic experiences, in this collection of essays Woolfe invites us to reflect critically on topics as disparate as alien symbols, DMT entities, messages from plant spirits, and *déjà vus*. In what follows I provide an overview and critical assessment of Sam Woolfe's *Altered Perspectives*.

1. An Overview of Altered Perspectives

The book is comprised of ten chapters. It begins with a few essays that I would describe as "conventional", by which I mean that they explore connections that many with a background in philosophy and with an interest in psychedelic experiences will intuitively make. Chapter 1 analyzes the topic of ego-dissolution through Hume's "bundle theory" of subjectivity and the Buddhist claim that selfhood is an illusion; chapter 2 looks at the mystical "noetic" revelation through Spinoza's conception of God; and chapter 4 studies the idea of the "sublime" in relation to psychedelic states (I would argue that, for thematic coherence, chapters 3 and 4 should have been swapped, see below).

In these chapters we can already see two of *Altered Perspectives*' original contributions. First, Woolfe is willing to venture into places

* Corresponding author at: Tilburg School of Catholic Theology, Department of Religion and Practice, Utrecht/Tilburg, Tilburg University, The Netherlands, email address: a.cavallarin@tilburguniversity.edu (A. Cavallarin).
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-7182-1643

where mainstream researchers are often unwilling to go. A perfect example of this is his discussion of psychedelic-induced visions of fractals in the essay on the sublime. Second, Woolfe continuously puts his own psychedelic experiences in communication with his theoretical analysis. For example, in chapter 1 he tests different theories of subjectivity against one of his experiences of subjectlessness on mescaline, similarly to how a scientist would test a hypothesis against empirical findings. This unique blend of rigorous analysis and personal experience is a hallmark of *Altered Perspectives*.

The next essays start veering towards DMT experiences specifically: we are beginning to enter *strange* territory. Chapter 3 is about the "birth trauma hypothesis", i.e., the idea that DMT experiences might display certain features – e.g., traveling through a passage towards a bright light, or encounters with alien "doctor-like" entities – because they allow us to reexperience the trauma of entering the human world for the first time. This essay also touches on some underappreciated parallels between DMT entity encounters, alien abductions, and religious experiences involving angels or deities. Chapter 5 discusses some potential links between asemic writing (i.e., meaningless language-like writing), automatic writing/drawing (i.e., writing or drawing non-consciously, driven by "something else"), and the alien symbols and language-like shapes that one can experience on DMT. Chapter 6, following this weirdness train, looks at the "jesters" and "trickster" entities typical of the DMT realm through the lens of their respective archetypes, as developed in the Jungian tradition. This last essay includes a mesmerizing recollection of Woolfe's own encounters with these entities.

At this point another core feature of *Altered Perspectives* becomes evident: Woolfe works by *theme*; he picks a topic (often, something that is already "in the air" in psychedelic scholarship) and exhausts it, by examining it from all relevant perspectives, including philosophical accounts, scientific data, and more speculative, unorthodox proposals. Interestingly, contrary to other works that are this wide and daring in scope, Woolfe always appears to end on a skeptical note, at least regarding the stranger elements of altered states of consciousness. The fractal visions from chapter 4, for example, are quickly explained away as visions of one's own brain structure (p. 88), and the DMT alien symbols of chapter 5, Woolfe suggests, are better explained as the cross-wiring of different brain systems involved in vision, language, and meaning (p. 140). I will come back to these points later.

Chapters 7 and 8 are two parts of a long essay on "psychedelic teleology", the idea, popular in some psychedelic circles, that psychedelic plants and fungi have a mission for us. This idea emerges out of the experience, common when ingesting these compounds, of coming in contact with plant spirits, "elders", or "teachers", with a message regarding humanity's purpose. The message is, astonishingly often, the following: humans have strayed away from their true nature and potential, and we better reestablish a loving relationship with each other and with the natural world before it is too late.

These two essays are, effectively, a step-by-step deconstruction of psychedelic teleology. Woolfe's critique extends to the idea of human-like intelligence in nature, the apparent inconsistencies of these plant messengers, and the very idea of "spirits". What we are left with is a naturalistic explanation for these apocalyptic messages, according to which they result from an interaction of cultural influences, cognitive biases, and internalized messages, made possible by psychedelic substances' tendency to dissolve psychological boundaries. Psychedelic plants and fungi are not "teachers", Woolfe tells us, but they are certainly valuable tools in our quest to restore a healthy relationship with nature and with each other.

The book ends with two shorter essays that allow the reader to take a breather after the *tour de force* that was the psychedelic teleology saga. Chapter 9 is a study of Bergson's understanding of *déjà vus*, relating it to the sense of familiarity, of "I have been here before", that often accompanies DMT experiences. The essay ends

by explaining these phenomena away as the activation of the rhinal cortex, tricking us into thinking that we are retrieving an old memory (p. 295). Finally, chapter 10 proposes an existential analysis of psychedelic experiences that passes through authors like Martin Buber, Nietzsche, Emil Cioran, and Whitehead. This essay – and with it, the book – closes by praising psychedelics' capacity to enhance our existential joy through, amongst other things, their ability to satisfy our "will to novelty".

The following might be said as an overall statement. Many nowadays seem driven towards psychedelics because of their "weirder" elements, such as their capacity to seemingly put us in contact with non-human intelligent entities, to take us to realms that feel alien and familiar at the same time, or to let us know the desires of a natural world in desperate need of help. With this book, Sam Woolfe argues that we can appreciate the extraordinary potential of psychedelic substances to improve lives and restore relationships, without being naïve about the reality of the psychedelic cornucopia. This is, I believe, the core message of *Altered Perspectives*.

Now I would like to raise some points of contention, focusing on Woolfe's preference for naturalistic explanations of psychedelic experiences. As I will argue, Woolfe's approach, while often valuable and insightful, might at times hide unwarranted biases. I leave my praises for *Altered Perspectives* for the conclusion, hoping that this order of operation will make the book's achievements stand out more than they already do.

2. Naturalism, Entity Encounters, and Boggle Threshold

At multiple points of *Altered Perspectives*, when a unique feature of psychedelics is presented, or an understudied phenomenon is introduced, it is almost immediately explained away by a scientific theory. This is not to say that Woolfe is dogmatic, or close-minded in his analysis. *Very* far from it: as I mentioned above, he discusses topics that many scholars might handwave away, and seriously engages with unorthodox explanations that many will have not heard of. However, skeptical takes about the reality of psychedelic experiences do seem to pervade the book, and, indeed, close most of the essays.

A first critical point that I would like to raise in relation to this approach is the fact that it does not seem to be applied uniformly throughout the book; or, in different words, that not all psychedelic experiences are given the same benefit of the doubt. This is evident if we compare the chapters discussing entity encounters (chapters 3, 6, and 8) with those on the mystical ego-dissolution and sense of cosmic union (specifically chapters 1 and 2).

In chapter 3 we are told that "the simplest and most reasonable" justification for DMT aliens might be a combination of one's pre-existing ideas about what an alien-abduction-type experience involves, and "abnormal activity in the temporal lobe" (pp. 65-68). In chapter 6, DMT-induced encounters with jesters and trickster entities are attributed to our innate psychological tendencies to detect agency, anthropomorphize, and attribute intentionality: "The entities may be the end result of the brain trying to predict patterns in ambiguous stimuli" (p. 172). Finally, chapter 8, despite undoubtedly providing a thorough analysis, ultimately attributes the psychedelic experience of nature spirits to the same psychological biases mentioned above, at times crystallized by a setting that might reinforce the belief in these spirits (pp. 255-8).[1]

What about the more traditional psychedelic-induced mystical experiences? Chapter 1 discusses ego-dissolution. At no point are we given the impression that these experiences might be the product of abnormal brain activity. To give an example, elsewhere Woolfe explains how psychedelics enhance the brain's

[1] I should stress that here I am talking about Woolfe's arguments against the existence of nature spirits in general. He provides other arguments that convincingly undermine some *specific understandings* of these spirits. More on this in the Conclusion.

connectivity (p. 36). Is it not possible that the experience of ego-death is the illusory outcome of a mistaken connection made by our brain under the influence of a substance; a mistake that is finally resolved when the brain reverts to its normal functioning?

Chapter 2 is also an interesting case of this bias. Woolfe begins his discussion of the mystical insight by mentioning a variety of reasons why we should be skeptical of its veridicality. In these pages, however, he also says the following: "It could also be the case that some kind of understanding is possible only when the organ of understanding, the brain, is modulated in a certain way" (p. 34). It is this line of inquiry, rather than the skeptical path, that Woolfe proceeds to explore. Specifically, he argues that the mystical state can be considered real if we combine cosmopsychism (the idea that the universe as a whole is conscious) with a reducing valve theory of the mind, according to which psychedelics free the brain from its self-imposed cognitive constraints.

I am not suggesting that this strategy is problematic. Quite the contrary. What I am arguing is that other psychedelic-based metaphysical claims should be given the same *chance* in the arena of ideas. Why are "weirder" psychedelic experiences ultimately reduced to neuropsychological processes, but mystical experiences are not? Why are we not told that there might be complex realities beyond our everyday experience of the world, which might become accessible when "the brain is modulated in a certain way"?[2] Why is the potential reality of geometric visions, entity encounters, or *déjà vus* (whatever it might mean for a *déjà vu* to be "real") not salvaged through a combination of theories?[3]

This takes me to a related point of critique: the alleged superiority of naturalistic explanations for the stranger elements of the psychedelic experience. This is a complex topic that I do not have the space to discuss in detail here. Woolfe's core mistake, however, seems to me the same that William James already warned us against: describing what is going on in a person's body during an experience doesn't tell us much, if anything, about the experience's epistemic status. Woolfe is certainly aware of this concern, as he explores it in some detail. However, the only rebuttal he advances against it is: "We have to also be open to the possibility that one can have a feeling of insight without any actual insight" (p. 35).

To give a concrete example, chapter 8 attributes encounters with spirits to our evolutionary tendency to detect agency when a sensory input is not clear, and to interpret this as a human-like, or intentional, entity. This argument, however, does not tilt the scale towards the idea that disincarnate entities are made up by our brains. It is equally likely (at least on the basis of this argument alone) that these entities do exist, and that humans are simply *naturally receptive* to them.[4] How do we pick between the naturalistic and the supernatural explanation? Certainly not pointing to what is going on in our brains, since in both accounts a similar kind of brain activity is to be expected. To provide a means of comparison, saying that non-human entities do not exist because humans have a tendency to attribute agency and anthropomorphize is like saying that *other humans* do not exist because one has these tendencies: once again, stressing the neuropsychological mechanisms behind an experience does not tell us much, if anything, about the reality of the experience.

I am inclined to believe that whether we

[2] Woolfe might object that entity encounters are too diverse to all be real (as he states on p. 243). However, (1) mystical experiences can also be extremely diverse, and (2) diversity does not necessarily make the reality of these encounters impossible; it might be the case, for example, that our brain shapes our experience of these entities depending on our specific context (an argument that is routinely advanced for mystical experiences).

[3] In a personal correspondence, Sam Woolfe told me that some of these inconsistencies are due to when the essays were written. Nowadays he would be at least as skeptical of chapter 2's approach to mystical experiences as he is of plant spirits.

[4] Woolfe mentions this option briefly (p. 258), but does not elaborate on it.

consider a specific psychedelic experience real or not does not have to do with rationality: it mainly has to do with our "boggle threshold", i.e., the amount of weirdness one is inclined to accept before instinctively feeling like "this is too weird to be true". I believe that most researchers' boggle threshold has been shaped by how scholarship on altered states of consciousness has developed in the West in the past 100 years or so. This has pushed many of us – including Woolfe, or so I argued – to see mystical experiences as special in some way, and other psychedelic experiences as not worth the same benefit of the doubt.

3. Conclusion

The biases I have now described towards certain experiences and explanations – or, perhaps, just the difference in temperament between Woolfe and myself – should not be seen as undermining *Altered Perspective*'s achievements.

To begin with, Woolfe considerably pushes forward the philosophical discourse on psychedelic experiences and altered states of consciousness in general. Underappreciated experiences and theories that many mainstream scholars avoid even mentioning are described in detail and rigorously analyzed, providing overall pictures that might prove a necessary point of reference for anyone wishing to explore the same topics in the future. In my opinion, chapter 5 on asemic writing and DMT alien symbols is especially remarkable in this regard, given the uniqueness of the topic and the depth of Woolfe's analysis. The breadth of scope and daring attitude displayed in *Altered Perspectives* should be of inspiration for other researchers in the field.

Second, while I have criticized Woolfe's preference for naturalistic explanations, it is in my view undeniable that the general *forma mentis* that comes with his attitude proves especially effective in weeding out the contradictions and inconsistencies in ideas that are very common in the psychedelic world. Nowhere is this more evident than in chapters 7 and 8 on psychedelic teleology. Here Woolfe highlights, for example, how peculiar it is that the plant teachers would choose plants and fungi that cause nausea, that provide seemingly mutually exclusive visions, or that only induce certain visions at high doses, to ask for humanity's help to save the world. Or how some indigenous groups (e.g., the Yanomami) were pushed to *wage wars* by these plant elders. Or how, given our modern understanding of these substances (e.g., given our ability to synthesize them), we would have to claim, rather oddly, that the nature spirit is in the *chemical compound*. Irrespective of where one stands on the metaphysical status of psychedelic experiences, this critical attitude seems necessary to further our intellectual understanding of altered states.

A final point that I want to mention is how Woolfe, at multiple points of the book, advocates for further research on the neural correlates of non-mystical extraordinary experiences, such as the experience of DMT alien symbols (p. 139), DMT entities (p. 179), or DMT *déjà vus* (p. 295). This seems to me a call worth supporting, both because it would help normalize experiences of this kind in mainstream academia, and because it would advance our general understanding, in the same way that neuroscientific research on mystical states informed our understanding of these experiences.

Overall, *Altered Perspectives* is well written, intellectually engaging, and a must-have for anyone interested in the philosophy of altered states of consciousness, regardless of creed and inclinations. I would like to close by stressing that, beyond intellectual debates, Sam Woolfe's book displays a passionate commitment to the potential of psychedelic substances to improve our lives. In his words: "if sensibly approached, a single psychedelic journey could open someone up to positive mental states never before experienced, both in terms of variety and intensity" (p. 320). If I may rephrase Woolfe's conclusion in my own words: even when we are debating the nits and grits of psychedelics, we should never forget the opportunities that these substances open us up to.

Conflicts of interest

No conflicts of interest to report.

Funding

No funding was received to assist with the preparation of this manuscript.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Sam Woolfe for his feedback on the essay.

Bibliography

Woolfe, S. (2024). Altered Perspectives: Critical Essays on Psychedelic Consciousness. IFF Books.