

Psychedelic Unselfing and Moral Perception

A Philosophical Account of the Change of Values Induced by
Psychedelic Experiences

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Abstract

Scientific and scholarly attention to psychedelics has recently faced a resurgence. Recent studies suggest that psychedelic experiences can change values and behavioral dispositions, for example increase appreciation of nature and increase prosocial behavior. For this reason psychedelics have been identified as a promising option for moral neuroenhancement. However, we still struggle to understand these changes in the valuations psychedelics induce, or why exactly they are morally enhancing.

In this thesis I construct a philosophical framework to understand these changes. I combine Iris Murdoch and Abraham Maslow's thinking with empirical studies on psychedelics and experiences of self-transcendence. Psychedelics induce experiences of self-transcendence which involve evaluative changes. I argue that these changes are not random but result from an intelligible process. I first claim that psychedelics in some cases induce unselfing, that is, perspectival and evaluative changes resulting from reduction of salience attributed to oneself. By reducing egoic centering, unselfing opens our attention to the world and can cause perspectival widening from egocentric into more allocentric (other-directed) or cosmocentric (universal) perspective. The second main claim is that the process of unselfing is often connected to sharpened perception of values. The increased attention to the world and reduced egocentric attributions of salience, resulting from unselfing, can widen our evaluative context and make it possible to perceive or grasp intrinsic values better, thus 'tuning the moral compass' away from instrumental egocentric mode of evaluation.

This thesis makes an original contribution to current discussions on moral neuroenhancement by presenting a well-elaborated connection between the experiences of self-transcendence and the evaluative changes. At least some changes in values associated with psychedelic experiences are related to unselfing. Further the framework provided is relevant not only for understanding value changes in psychedelic experiences, but it can be used to understand and to conceptually and theoretically integrate various phenomena which involve unselfing and techniques that aim at spiritual, moral and existential changes. Another original contribution of this thesis is that psychedelic experiences and moral neuroenhancement are discussed with the conceptual means of Murdoch's and Maslow's thought.

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In the state of wise passiveness we make possible the emergence of forms of consciousness other than the utilitarian consciousness of normal waking life. Useful analytical knowledge about the world is replaced by some kind of biologically inessential but spiritually enlightening acquaintance with the world. For example, there can be direct acquaintance with the world as beauty. Or there can be direct acquaintance with the intrinsic strangeness of existence, its wild implausibility. And finally there can be direct acquaintance with the world's unity. (Huxley 1999, 252)

1 Introduction

The claim that twenty milligrams of psilocybin or two hundred micrograms of LSD could let us perceive the world accurately may sound quite unconvincing. If so, the claim that experiences therefore induced might perceptually reveal such values as the platonic triad of the good, true and beautiful, and transform a person accordingly is outright blasphemous. Nevertheless, with a couple of important caveats I will argue for this, defending the existential and moral value of certain psychedelic experiences.

Before going to the details of the thesis, let's take an example of the kinds of experiences we are talking about. Michael Pollan in his recent work of investigative journalism *How to Change Your Mind* vividly describes his insightful journey after a fair amount of *psilocybe cubensis*, the 'magic mushrooms':

"I" Now turned into a sheaf of little papers, no bigger than Post-its, and they were being scattered to the wind. [I] looked and saw myself out there again, but this time spread over the landscape like paint, or butter, thinly coating a wide expanse of the world with a substance I recognized as me... [T]he "personal" had been obliterated. Everything I once was and called me, this self six decades in the making, had been liquefied and dispersed over the scene. What had always been a thinking, feeling, perceiving subject based here was now an object out there. I was paint! ... The sovereign ego, with all its armaments and fears, its backward-looking resentments and forward-looking worries, was simply no more, and there was on one left to mourn its passing. Yet something had succeeded it: this bare disembodied awareness, which gazed upon the scene of the self's dissolution with benign indifference. I was present to reality but as something other than my self. And although there was no self left to feel, exactly, there was a feeling tone, which was calm, unburdened, content. There was life after the death of the ego. This was big news. (Pollan 2018, 263–264)

Psychedelic experiences are predominantly more perceptual than verbal, even to the point of ineffability. Ways to retrospectively put them to words are always to some extent

idiosyncratic and poetic. Still the passage above illustrates one token of experiences to be inquired into. In psychedelic states the sense of identity or self can go through changes, culminating in this kind of temporary disintegration or dissolution of ego. These kinds of experiences are called by various names, '(drug induced) ego-dissolution' (DIED) being one term commonly used. These changes in the sense of self can be experienced as expanding and awe-inspiring, albeit sometimes also frightening and disorienting. Here we will focus mostly on the reported descriptions of their beneficial side. For example, Belser et al. (2017) charted the experiences of cancer patients who received psilocybin, the active ingredient of magic mushrooms and conclude:

The dissolution of normal identity often led to a feeling of interconnection with other people, the entire planet, or even the universe at large. ... Rather than feeling disempowered from being subsumed within a greater whole, many participants reported new feelings of empowerment and personal agency to live meaningful lives, and a sense of belonging and acceptance within their communities and the larger universe. (Belser et al. 2017, 16–17)

Psychedelic experiences are often associated with various benefits, presumably by mediation of these kinds of radically altered states of consciousness. Psychedelic experiences are prone to enhance sense of meaning and connection with the world (Hartogsohn 2018; Carhart-Harris et al. 2018; Watts et al. 2017). The recent empirical research points to the direction that they can enhance well-being and solve psychological conflicts both in healthy and distressed individuals (Jungaberle et al. 2018; Elsey 2017; Tupper et al. 2015). Fear of death and anxiety in terminal cancer patients, post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, depression, and addiction have been found to be eased by structured therapy utilizing psychedelics, according to recent studies (Schenberg 2018; Tupper et al. 2015; Carhart-Harris & Goodwin 2017; Carhart-Harris & Friston 2019, 334; Winkelman 2014).¹ According to some of these studies, even a single dose with appropriate preparation and support can give long-term benefits in well-being that last weeks and even months. Similarly, psychedelic experiences can sometimes lead to reorganization of personality, life priorities and valuations, such as increases in nature-relatedness and openness to experience (Kettner et al. 2019; Yaden et al. 2017; Lerner and Lyvers 2006; Nour et al. 2017; Studerus et al. 2011; Forstmann & Sagioglou 2017; MacLean

¹ MAPS (Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies) has on their website a comprehensive list of research about therapeutic aspects of psychedelics: <http://www.maps.org/research> (accessed 23.3.2020).

et al. 2011). These reported value changes are important for my thesis, so we will survey them more closely soon.

Notably, these changes associated with psychedelics are related to altered states of consciousness consisting of intense psychological processes, contrary to many other psychiatric drugs (Letheby 2015, 176–185; Majic et al. 2015; Liester & Prickett 2012). Significant for the therapeutic and perspectival changes are so-called mystical experiences, peak-experiences or ego dissolutions, experiences like the one Pollan had. There are notable differences in therapeutic benefits between those people who experience, say, a mystical experience during a psychedelic trip and those who do not (Griffiths et al. 2006 & 2008; Majic et al. 2015; Carhart-Harris & Friston 2019, 336–337). Importantly, such experiences are not occasioned only by psychedelic drugs but by a variety of means – for example meditation, sensory deprivation and austerities of various kinds can bring forth similar experimental states. I focus on perspectival shifts involved in such experiences. Thus, many arguments made in this thesis can be generalized to a much wider scope of questions of altered states of consciousness.

Many authors, researchers and enthusiasts have taken the stance that psychedelics indeed can be a factor for fostering spirituality and good life, from Huxley (1954) and Hoffman (1980) onwards, although critical voices have also been raised (recently for example by Lavazza 2017 or Rocher 2010). Psychedelics can sometimes alter perspectives on life radically and in a beneficial manner – although not in every case, for everybody, nor in every context or pattern of use.

Yet we hardly understand these experiences: they involve many puzzling philosophical questions begging to be answered: concerning both the immediate experiences and the long-term changes in perspectives, values and beliefs they sometimes impart. Do psychedelic experiences occasion veridical *seeing* into the nature of affairs that would cause these changes? Or are they irrational, merely drug-induced misperceptions? Our construal of psychedelic experiences would significantly change in a positive direction, if it could be established that these processes of change are in some sense rational or intelligible. The goal of this thesis is to argue that at least some psychedelic experiences – those that lead to good outcomes and involve certain phenomenological features – can be understood as involving an intelligible and in some sense rational process that leads to the change of values and perspectives. I set out to examine this process that can be used to connect these changes in wellbeing, values and perspectives together. The process in question is called *unselfing*, to use the concept borrowed from Iris Murdoch (1997, 369).

1.1 Unselfing

The first claim of the argument is that psychedelics induce unselfing, that is, perspectival and evaluative changes that happen from the reduction of salience attributed to and in relation to self. The basic idea of unselfing is that by reducing egoic centering, unselfing opens our attention to the world and can cause perspectival widening from egocentric into more allocentric (other-directed) or cosmocentric (universal) perspective. The second main argument is that this process of unselfing has not only existential and therapeutic but also moral-psychological and moral-epistemological value: the unselfing is helpful for moral perception, especially for the perception of intrinsic values. Unselfing can help us to pay attention to the world and thus perceive values in a less egocentric manner by reducing bias created by egocentric attributions of salience. The process of unselfing changes our evaluation in such a way that we are more prone to perceive and acknowledge intrinsic values, and less prone to reduce all value to egocentric instrumental pursuits. On this basis I argue that psychedelics can work as tools for moral neuroenhancement. Observed changes in fostering for example ecological and aesthetic values and prosocial behavior as a result of psychedelic experiences presumably involve this process of unselfing and related enhancement of perception of intrinsic values, when egocentric salience is not so much colouring the vision.

The theme of unselfing ties together certain philosophical issues and recent discussions on the effects of psychedelics. It is well established that psychedelics induce changes in the sense of self and sometimes in subsequent valuations. Although these themes have been independently discussed, yet no separate work has been done to elaborate the connection between these two themes. To take a broader picture, the theme of unselfing is central because it ties together many different changes induced by psychedelics, from therapeutic to spiritual-existential and moral. Unselfing seems to be one way to 'naturalize' certain aspects of psychedelic use associated with their spiritual or religious use (cf. Letheby 2017a & Steinhart 2018). The idea that the spiritual pursuit is somehow connected to overcoming the self and our egocentric tendencies is a perennial theme of religions and spiritual traditions, one that does not necessarily involve heavy metaphysical assumptions, and it seems to be a fairly inclusive one. The theme of unselfing offers a robust connection between these themes of spirituality, morality and living a flourishing life. Thus, on a conceptual or theoretical level this theme has a high integrative capacity, offering a parsimonious and unified way to understand and conceptualize a wide variety of changes.

1.2 Context of the Thesis

The philosophical analysis of psychedelic experiences is still in its infancy, and seriously lagging behind the work done in psychology and neuroscience. Considering how fruitful these phenomena are for philosophical inquiry, psychedelics have been ignored to a surprising degree in philosophy until the very recent years.² A generation of psychologists and scholars of religions did significant work on psychedelics in the 1950's and 1960's, but academic philosophical contributions were scarce. Shedding light on psychedelic experiences with emphasis on mysticism and religious concepts was done by intellectuals such as Aldous Huxley (1954), Alan Watts (1962), Gerard Heard (1963) and Huston Smith (1964; 2004).³ However, the older material by academic philosophers is mostly limited to anecdotal off-hand notes in the lives and works of Foucault (1970) and Sartre (Lundborg 2012, 19–21)⁴. Merleau-Ponty wrote analyses of mescaline experiences (see Szummer et al. 2017), and a couple of short papers were published by Osmond (1971) and Smythies (1983).

Today there is a growing interest in psychedelics in academic philosophy. Letheby (2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019) and Shanon (2002, 2010) have both argued that psychedelics can impart certain forms of knowledge or understanding. Work related to philosophical questions about the self has been done by Millièrè (2017, 2018) and Letheby (2020; with Gerrans 2016). In the field of moral enhancement authors such as Earp (2018), Earp et al (2018), Tennison (2012), Ballesteros (2019) and Ahlskog (2017) have published papers discussing psychedelics. Epistemic issues related to altered states and the change of worldviews have been tackled by Flanagan (2017) and Flanagan & Graham (2017) in their work about 'metaphysical hallucinations'. Steinhart (2018) and Letheby (2015) have also commented on psychedelics from the perspective of naturalized spirituality. Peter

² Psychedelic experiences provide rich material for philosophical analysis that touch upon the themes such as perception, the relation between experience and external reality, the relation between experiential and verbal aspects of our experience, and the core processes of meaning-making and construction of our experience including the sense of self.

³ On top of these there have been many authors such as Timothy Leary, Richard Alpert, John C. Lilly, Terrence McKenna, Robert Anton Wilson who have popularized the subject and written in a loose sense philosophical material on psychedelics, although (mostly) outside academic context.

⁴ Both Foucault and Sartre had impactful experiences on psychedelics. Sartre after a massive amount of mescaline had for several years hallucinations of crabs (Lundborg 2012, 19–21). Foucault according to an interview had a powerful LSD experience that arguably affected his later life and career. See interview with Simeon Wade who accompanied Foucault on his trip: <https://boomcalifornia.com/2017/09/10/michel-foucault-in-death-valley-a-boom-interview-with-simeon-wade/> (Accessed 20.2.2020)

Sjöstedt-Hughes (2015), a doctorate student, has published a collection of philosophical essays concerning psychedelics. Lavazza (2017) and Roche (2010) have also raised critical questions concerning the epistemic and pragmatic worth of psychedelics.⁵

Regarding the larger context, psychedelics can be seen as a part of the philosophical debate on other altered states of consciousness and similar phenomena, charted in contemporary philosophy (Windt 2011). These include general philosophical works on altered states of consciousness, dreaming, meditation, experiences such as out-of-body-experiences and certain perceptual illusions. Philosophy of mind and consciousness informed by empirical cases of alteration of consciousness has most famously been developed by philosopher Thomas Metzinger (see Metzinger 2003; 2013). Philosophical studies on psychedelic experiences are also related to the research fields of philosophy of psychiatry and of transpersonal psychology.

1.3 Structure of the Thesis

Chapter two is an introduction to psychedelic experiences and empirical findings concerning changes in values and perspectives. I first give a short overview of the history of psychedelic use, including the risks they involve. Then I chart the phenomenology of psychedelic experiences. Next, I discuss their effects on values and beliefs. Finally, I examine certain philosophical issues raised by these transformations and discuss the literature on moral neuroenhancement to contextualize my argument adequately.

In chapter three I unpack the concept of unselfing. First, I examine different conceptions of the self, and argue that unselfing should be understood especially in relation to evaluative aspects of selfhood. I propose that our experience can be situated on a perspectival continuum with imagined total egocentricity on the one end and imagined total cosmocentricity on the other. In the process of unselfing our attention opens to the world, and our experiential perspective towards the world transforms into more allocentric or cosmocentric, to a more other-directed or universal perspective.

In chapter four I argue that unselfing is relevant for moral perception, drawing heavily from Iris Murdoch's moral thought. First, I present a general account of moral perception and values. Then I examine Murdoch's conception of moral perception in more detail, including claims that values are real and that our perception is inherently both conceptual and

⁵ These are the most relevant papers published in philosophy journals in English in recent years. The list is representative but not exhaustive as new papers are constantly being published.

evaluative. I then connect the themes of egocentricity and unselfing to the discussion of moral perception, with the main claim that unselfing can help with moral perception by making us pay more attention to reality in a less instrumental manner, and thus perceive more of the intrinsic values, as the evaluative context widens. I examine the case of peak-experiences and associated Being-values – a notion very close to intrinsic values – in the thinking of Abraham Maslow to connect the theme of moral perception to altered states. I also propose that unselfing could be understood as a form of inverse cognitive penetration. Finally, I discuss different meta-ethical positions to understand the perception of values.

The fifth chapter of the thesis connects the discussion of unselfing and moral perception to psychedelics, grounding the argument on qualitative analyses of psychedelic therapy. Certain changes in the perception of the world during psychedelic experiences can be seen as results from unselfing, including enhancement of sense of meaning and connection, and increased awe and wonder. These kinds of perspectival and existential changes are in the core of psychedelic spirituality. After this, I examine the cases of value perception that occur during psychedelic experiences, concluding that psychedelics can clearly widen the evaluative context, and thus connect one both to novel values and values formerly held but forgotten in day-to-day life or as a result of perspectival narrowing (resulting from, for example, mental health issues). According to these descriptions psychedelic experiences sometimes change the valuation away from instrumental pursuit towards intrinsic values, such as appreciation of beauty or nature. Finally, I bring forth and discuss the criticisms and main counter arguments raised by this debate.

2 Psychedelic Experiences and Their Transformational Potential

2.1 Psychedelics

To give a brief overview, psychedelics refer usually to so-called classical psychedelics, namely LSD, psilocybin-containing mushrooms, certain mescaline containing cacti and DMT, last of which is also found in many plants and is a central ingredient of plant concoctions such as ayahuasca (Swanson 2018, 3)⁶. All classical psychedelics work in the

⁶ On top of these four classical psychedelics there are hundreds of other psychedelic compounds, which form two major chemical groups: phenethylamines and tryptamines. There are also other chemicals and classes of chemicals – such as dissociatives (for example ketamine), deliriants (for

nervous system mainly by binding to a certain serotonin receptor: they are 5HT2A receptor agonists and can be conceptualized as exogenous neurotransmitter analogues (Nichols 2016; Winkelman 2002).

Psychedelics cause strong changes in the state of consciousness, in sensory experience and cognition. The scope of different subjective experiences is enormous, ranging from fun and aesthetic experiences to deep self reflection, from exalted mystical experiences to 'bad trips' filled with panic and anxiety. The ensuing experiences are extremely sensitive to the context of drug use (Carhart-Harris et al. 2018; Hartogsohn 2017). The experiences are often considered to be profound and intense, as if a broad spectrum of experience is condensed into a very small timeframe. Still they keep many cognitive domains intact, and do not cause hallucinations that would not be recognized as such, although they can distort sensory perception and induce visionary states of enhanced imagination a bit similar to intense dreams or daydreams⁷. The duration of the experience varies from the quarter of an hour trip produced by DMT to the over 12 hours long effect of mescaline. After the proper psychedelic 'trip' positive after-effects are sometimes experienced (Majik et al. 2015).

One crucial concept for understanding the action of psychedelic compounds is that of 'set and setting', which refers to extra-pharmacological contextual influences. 'Set' refers to the mindset and personality factors of the individual, covering parameters like expectations, mood, current situation, personal history and psychological constitution of the person. 'Setting' refers to the mainly physical and social environment, but also cultural surroundings of the experience. (Carhart-Harris et al. 2018; Hartogsohn 2017). Effects of any kind of psychoactive substance can hardly be understood without taking the context and expectations into account, but psychedelics are especially sensitive to contextual factors (Carhart-Harris et al. 2018; Hartogsohn 2017; Fischer 1971, 901). Attributions of meaning, interpretations and conceptions about the effects and other contextual factors heavily feed back onto the psychedelic experience in a self-reinforcing, looking-glass type of dynamic.

example datura) and kappa-opioid antagonists (such as salvia divinorum) – which together with psychedelics can be classified as hallucinogenic. Also, popular party drug MDMA exhibits certain common features with classical psychedelics but is closer to stimulants. Cannabis too is considered to be a borderline case, exhibiting some psychedelic features. Also, it should be acknowledged that DMT especially when inhaled in high doses has phenomenological qualities quite different from the regular doses of other psychedelics.

⁷ Although the analogy to dreams is apt in some sense, psychedelics also have remarkable differences from dreams: the experience is more lucid and intense, the content is less narrative than in dreams, and the meanings in the visions are usually not ambiguous in the way contents of dreams are (Shanon 2002, 409–434).

How to conceptualize a psychedelic experience is a difficult question. Depending on the overall cultural context of use, psychedelics have been used for a variety of different purposes: ranging from religious sacraments to traditional medicine plants, from catalysts for psychotherapeutic processes to tools of cognitive enhancement, creativity and self-exploration to recreational drugs. On the cultural level, psychedelic experiences become part of what we think they are, and how we frame them (Hartogsohn 2016, 2017; Carhart-Harris et al. 2015). This is reflected in many different paradigms with which psychedelics have been approached and the different experiences generated thereby: ranging from seeing psychedelics as ‘psychotomimetics’ to sacred substances with inherent intelligence (Swanson 2018).

2.1.1 The History of Psychedelics

The use of psychoactive plants and other ritual techniques for alteration of consciousness are almost universal features of human communities based on anthropological evidence (Bourguignon 1973; Winkelman 2000). The use of psychoactive plants extends to human prehistory: archeological evidence points to use of non-psychedelic psychoactive plants among Neanderthals circa 60 000 years ago, and to the use of *San Pedro*, a species of psychedelic cacti, circa 7000 years ago in Mesoamerica (Guerra-Doce 2015, 7–8). There are reports of historic use of psychedelic plants and concoctions in Eurasia, African, South- and Meso-American tribes, and civilizations of South America (Guerra-Doce 2015; Schultes 1979; Furst 1990; Ott 1993), and a fair amount of speculation of their use in various traditions⁸.

The modern history of psychedelic use and psychedelic research can be divided into three waves (Swanson 2018, 1–2). First experiments and research projects were done with mescaline in the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century (Swanson 2018, 6–7; Carhart-Harris & Goodwin 2017). The second wave starts from the discovery of LSD by Albert Hofmann who synthesized the compound in 1938 and experimented the first LSD-trip in 1943 (Hofmann 1980, 5–15). In the 1950’s and 1960’s these compounds were widely researched. By 1965 there had accumulated over 2000 research papers based on a pool of over 40 000 subjects (Sessa 2005, 457). Different therapeutic applications like psycholytic and psychedelic therapy were developed and employed. Psychedelic research was cutting

⁸ For example, the mythical drink called *soma* in Veda-scriptures and *haoma* of Zorothruseans, potion called *kykeon* which was drunk in Eleusinian mysteries, and even *manna* mentioned in the Bible have been speculated to be psychedelic compounds (Ruck et al. 2008; Shanon 2008).

edge of psychiatry and neuroscience, leading for example to the discovery of the neurotransmitter serotonin and novel biological hypotheses about psychoses and schizophrenia (Nichols 2016; Swanson 2018, 6–7). This was halted after these compounds leaked out from the laboratory to common use in emerging youth culture of the 1960's. As result wide-spread use in anti-authoritarian counterculture, and because of sensational news about their claimed adverse effects the US government prohibited psychedelics in 1966. The prohibition was soon expanded internationally by the UN treaty of 1971, the Convention on Psychotropic Substances. Scientific research was effectively halted for decades (Stevens 1987; Letcher 2007; Lundborg 2012).

Now we are witnessing the third wave of psychedelic research and experimentation (Swanson 2018, 1–2). Research is again flourishing and psychedelics are used on a scale unprecedented in human history (Lundborg 2014, 77). A large number of people use psychedelics privately, for self-exploration, in underground therapy and in context of different festivals. They are employed in religious communities, such as traditional Amazonian shamanism, urban folk-healing practices in Amazon, among *Bwiti*-religion in West-Africa, in ayahuasca churches such as Santo Daime and União de Vegetal, and among North-American Native American Church (Shanon 2002, 21–25; Masters & Houston 1966, 42; Dobkin de Rios 1996). Ceremonies inspired by indigenous use of psychedelics are spreading around the globe, and drawing western people seeking healing and spirituality into areas of their traditional use.

2.1.2 The Risks Associated with Psychedelics

In empirical comparative analysis of harms of different drugs, psychedelics have been judged to be the least harmful compared to many other drugs, both in their harms to other people and to the user (Nutt et al. 2010). Physiologically classical psychedelics – LSD, psilocybin, mescaline and DMT – are remarkably safe, and deadly overdose is virtually impossible.⁹ Even long-term use in healthy subjects does not lead to cognitive problems, on the contrary (Elsley 2017). The risk of addiction is very low, and psychedelics are even used to treat addictions caused by other drugs (Winkelman 2014). The risks of psychedelics are mostly psychological, and even these are quite minimal in responsible and supervised use (Elsley 2017, 5–7).

⁹ However, some non-classical psychedelics, falling into the wide category of NPS (New Psychoactive Substances) such as 25b-NBOMe might pose serious physiological dangers in doses exceeding the recreational dose (Bersani et al. 2014).

The data accumulated so far does not support the claim that psychedelics would in general cause mental disorders. Psychedelics have been on the contrary associated with reduced risk of suicide and psychological distress on population level, whereas other commonly used recreational drugs increased the risk (Hendricks et al. 2015). Krebs and Johansen found that in the US adult population lifetime intake of psychedelics was associated with lower levels of inpatient psychiatric treatment (Krebs & Johansen 2013). Both of these statistical analyses were based on samples of 100 000 US citizens of which approximately 20 000 persons had used psychedelics at least once. Based on studies into ritual use of ayahuasca, Santos et al. (2017) conclude that long-term ritual ayahuasca consumption is not associated with cognitive or psychiatric problems, although rare documented cases of psychosis point to the direction that individuals with pre-existing problems are at risk. Psychedelics definitely can contribute to mental destabilization, and this is why their use should be done with utmost care and sensitivity.

Acute reactions of panic, anxiety, fear and paranoia are the most common problems (Griffithsin et al. 2008, Elseyn 2017, 5–7). In colloquial terminology ‘bad trip’ or maybe more appropriately ‘challenging trip’ is used to denote especially difficult and uncomfortable psychedelic trips. Being inexperienced, taking substance in an unsuitable environment and certain personality traits can increase the likelihood of difficult experiences. There are very real reasons why optimal set and setting, and adequate preparation is needed. Sometimes difficult experiences can be traumatizing and cause after-effects or exacerbate existing mental problems: in the online survey of Carbonaro et al. (2016) out from almost 1993 cases of challenging experiences, three lead to persisting psychotic symptoms, and another three attempted suicide¹⁰ (a probability of 0,15% of all difficult experiences in both cases). Carbonaro et al. (2016) claim that difficult experiences often do not leave significant subsequent problems: actually 84% of the persons who filled the abovementioned survey reported learning from the experience. Recent qualitative studies such as Belser et al. (2017, 14–15) support the claim that difficult experiences often turn into valuable opportunities for learning. Psychedelic use can also teach skills to navigate the sometimes overwhelming states (Shanon 2010, Soler et al. 2016).

¹⁰ It should be noted self-selection bias might operate and skew the result: probably some of those potential subjects who developed psychosis and all who actually did suicide were unable to fill the survey. On the other hand, although some people might get more suicidal and psychotic after psychedelic use, on population level the effect might be opposite, if sufficient amounts of people get benefits for their mental health and have their risk to commit a suicide reduced.

Further there is a category of risks that is very different, and quite rarely commented in literature. This is the possibility of transformative experiences and the tricky aspects they possess. Quite rare and strong variety of these are so-called spiritual emergencies, intense, existentially difficult phases in life triggered by powerful spiritual experiences, where “episodes of non-ordinary states of consciousness accompanied by various emotional, perceptual, and psychosomatic manifestations” can be experienced, sometimes bordering the experience of becoming mad (Grof & Grof 2017, 1; Lewis 2008). These and less dramatic experiences that psychedelic induce can shake the foundations of the subject’s worldview, and are thus in a certain sense risks that should be acknowledged.

2.2. The Psychedelic Experience

2.2.1 The Varieties of Psychedelic Experiences

Psychedelics can produce almost any kind of experience imaginable – and also many surpassing the limitations of our sober imagination. Intricate taxonomies of different experiences are laid out in both *The Varieties of Psychedelic Experience* by Masters and Houston (1966), based on hundreds of guided psychedelic sessions, and *The Antipodes of the Mind* by Benny Shanon (2002), a detailed charting of thousands of experiences with ayahuasca. Other cartographies of the psychedelic landscape have been developed, for example that of Stanislav Grof (1980), and literature is full of observations of various kinds (for a review, Swanson 2018). To quote an illustrating list from Masters and Houston on the effects of LSD and peyote:

Changes in visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory, and kinesthetic perception; changes in experiencing time and space; changes in the rate and content of thought; body image changes; hallucinations; vivid images – eidetic images – seen with the eyes closed; greatly heightened awareness of color; abrupt and frequent mood and affect changes; heightened suggestibility; enchanted recall or memory; depersonalization and ego dissolution; dual, multiple and fragmented consciousness; seeming awareness of internal organs and processes of the body; upsurge of unconscious materials; enhanced awareness of linguistic nuances; increased sensitivity to nonverbal cues; sense of capacity to communicate much better by nonverbal means, sometimes including the telepathic; feelings of empathy; regression and “primitivization”; apparently heightened capacity for concentration; magnification of character traits and psychodynamic processes; an apparent nakedness of psychodynamic processes that make evident the interaction of ideation, emotion, and perception with one another and with inferred unconscious

processes; concern with philosophical, cosmological, and religious questions; and, in general, apprehension of a world that has slipped the chains of normal categorical ordering, leading to an intensified interest in self and world and also to a range of responses moving from extremes of anxiety to extremes of pleasure. (Masters & Houston 1966, 5–6)

Psychedelic trips further have different levels according to their intensity and nature of the predominant phenomena. Masters & Houston (1966, 142–151) write about the sensory, the recollective-analytic, the symbolic and the integral levels. On the sensory level the person under influence is interacting with outer reality and sensing and aesthetic experiences are greatly enhanced (Masters & Houston 1966, 142–144). Psychedelics thus seem to increase our attention to the sensory data and make us look at the world in a fresh manner. Aldous Huxley (1954) in his famous essay about his mescaline experiences, *The Doors of Perception*, repeatedly uses the metaphor, taken from the poem by William Blake, that both psychedelics and contemplative practice cleanse the doors of perception, thus opening us to the world in its wonder and detail. Some psychedelic experiences are characterized by introspective-linguistic processing of themes and problems in one's life (Masters & Houston 1966, 142–147, 151–183, 184–212). At this level many insights, creative and therapeutic processes can occur. Emotions are generally intensified. The cognitive effects are paradoxical: some aspects such as working memory are weakened, some like divergent thinking enhanced. Cognition in general becomes less constrained. A good summary of perceptual, emotional and cognitive effects can be found for example in Swanson (2018, 3–5).

Some psychedelic experiences are characterized by intense visions, sometimes imbued with strong symbolic and archetypal themes (Masters and Houston 1966, 147, 213–247). Vision range from kaleidoscopic and geometric visualizations to meaningful and symbolic images and scenes (Swanson 2018, 3–5). Complex visual hallucinations of legendary and mythological landscapes, ancient cities, galaxies, plants, fantastic creatures et cetera are recurring contents in phenomenology of psychedelic visions (Shanon 2002, 113–140). Finally psychedelic can lead one to spiritual and mystical experiences that are hard to describe by language, often involving radical changes in the basic parameters of our experience such as sense of self the boundary between subject and object, and experience of space and time (cf. Fischer 1971; Masters and Houston 1966, 148). A significant part of

psychedelic use is motivated by spiritual or sacramental motives (Móro & Noreika 2011).¹¹ This is reflected in the synonym *entheogen*, etymologically meaning ‘manifesting the divine within’ (Ruck et al. 2008). These kinds of experiences have been recently discussed under various terms, such as ‘mystical type experience’. Next I shall chart these in some detail since they are an important source for the deep perspectival shifts that have an important role in my argument.

2.2.2 The Varieties of Self-Transcendent Experiences

To describe these radical, potentially transformative altered states often interpreted as spiritual, certain terms have been coined. In addition to the term ‘mystical experience’ a group of sibling terms such as ego-dissolution experiences, peak-experiences, and experiences of self-transcendence are used, often almost interchangeably. Although all mystical experiences and all self-transcendent experiences are not ego-dissolutions, nor all experiences with changes in ego boundaries qualify as mystical, in many cases the exact name given to the experience is a bit arbitrary (Letheby & Gerrans 2017, 6). In psychological studies all these terms are quite well operationalized and are measured with questionnaires.

Mystical experiences are states where sense of space and time can be radically altered or transcended, often with accompanying characteristics of positive emotions such as bliss or ecstasy, sense of sacredness, ineffability, and noetic quality – a sense that one has gained non-propositional knowledge about the ultimate nature of reality. (Stace 1960; cf. Fischer 1971; Barrett & Griffiths 2017, 395–399).

Thus, it is no surprise that a paramount value has been attached to this class of experiences, and this class of experiences has historically been interpreted in religious terms. Different kinds of taxonomies to further classify mystical experiences have been developed, to capture not only their similarities but also differences (for example, Masters & Houston 1966, 303–312).¹² Many recent studies prefer the term ‘drug induced ego-dissolution’, which has

¹¹ In a framework developed to acknowledge different instrumental motivations and reasons for drug use, developed by Müller and Schumann (2011), the authors lately accepted spiritual use of psychedelic substances proposed by Móro and Noreika (2011) as a separate category of instrumental drug use.

¹² One useful distinction to note is between vertical and horizontal transcendence, or this-worldly and other-worldly mysticism. This-worldly mysticism denotes experiences in which one transcends the individual self in the metaphorically horizontal axis by uniting oneself with the surrounding cosmos. Other-worldly mysticism and vertical transcendence point to experiences in which other planes of being altogether different from the external reality are experienced, either the visionary ‘antipodes of the mind’ Huxley wrote about, or those ineffable experiences transcending the physical world into experience of formlessness, timelessness et cetera, often interpreted as divine

less religious connotations and directs attention to changes in ego-boundaries (Millière 2017; et al. 2018, Letheby & Gerrans 2017; Swanson 2018, 3–5)¹³.

Ego-dissolutions are experiences where the sense of self and/or the boundaries between self and world dissolve.

Alterations in the sense of self can come in various degrees and dimensions. (Millière 2017; Millière et al. 2018; Yaden et al. 2017, 3). Millière (2017) and Millière et al. (2018) categorize different aspects and dimensions of ego-dissolutions phenomenologically, proposing that the self is a multidimensional construct and different aspects of the self – such as bodily or narrative aspects – might differentially change in different experiences.¹⁴ In psychedelic experiences that cannot be characterized as *dissolution* of ego the line of demarcation between object and subject is often altered, borders of the ego can soften, the sense of self or identity can shift to or widen to encompass other objects or beings in the surrounding environment, either in psychedelic virtual space or in the external world (Shanon 2002, 205). The representation of the self, beliefs about self and the image of the body can alter and transform in size and appearance of the body et cetera (Shanon 2002, 86–112, 268; Masters and Houston 1966, 213–217). The experiential perspective can shift to encompass wholes larger or smaller than the scale we are accustomed to, allowing us to contemplate in an experiential and perceptual manner either whole galaxies or micro-organisms (Sjöstedt-Hughes 2015, 54–58). The range of changes varies dose-dependently, from softening of ego boundaries to full-blown ego-dissolutions.

or sacred (Goodenough, 2001, Letheby, 2016; Hunt 2013; Huxley 1954). Peak-experiences and ego-dissolutions more often tend to be characterized as horizontal or this-worldly rather than vertical, and vertical and other-worldly transcendence are more encountered in mystical experiences. In actual experiences, these different types can overlap and intermingle.

¹³ ‘Drug-induced ego dissolutions’ can be induced also by other compounds than psychedelics, such as ketamine (which work via NMDA glutamate receptors), and salvia divinorum, a kappa-opioid agonist. (Millière 2017, 5–7). On top of drugs alterations in the self-experience can be caused by meditation and many experimental techniques and are spontaneously encountered in psychiatric conditions (Millière 2018).

¹⁴ To nuance the distinction between narrative and embodied aspects of the self, Millière et al. (2018, 16–18) propose a multidimensional model of alterations, consisting of narrative self-consciousness (itself composed of frequency of self-related thoughts and access to semantic autobiographical information), bodily ownership, bodily awareness, self-location in space and the phenomenal richness of the experience. On top of these dimensions, changes in the sense of self can differ in their emotional valence: some experiences of ego-dissolution are anxiety provoking and others are not. Sometimes these can be experienced as very frightening, with accompanying fear of death, and strong anxiety can be experienced, especially if the experience is being resisted (Millière 2017, 4).

Peak-experiences is a term coined by Abraham Maslow to capture various high moments of one's life: the most meaningful, most ecstatic and memorable experiences one has.

For Maslow – central figure of humanistic and transpersonal psychology – peak-experiences are either states of absorption or perspectival widening (Maslow 1971, 242–243). During them “the whole universe is perceived as an integrated and unified whole”, the cognition is in a non-evaluating, non-comparing, or non-judgemental mode, and one is totally attending to what one is doing (Maslow 1970, 59). Maslow charted and theorized about these experiences and their wider context termed self-actualization, which denotes psychological growth toward optimal human flourishing and untypical levels of development. According to Maslow these experiences can also deeply shake and transform a person and his worldview (Maslow 1970, 59). Maslow sees them as a naturalistic phenomena and proposed the term as a naturalistic way of speaking about mystical or religious experiences (Maslow 1970, 19–29, 59). A bit similar term is ‘experiences of self-transcendence’:

Experiences of self-transcendence is an umbrella term that includes experiences above, and host of others. These experiences formed by a group of different mind states – such as flow-states, psychedelic states, peak-experiences and meditative states – are characterized by reduced salience attributed to the self, reduced egocentric motivation and self-consciousness (Yaden et al. 2017, 7–9, 11–12).

Yaden et al. theorize that in self-transcendent experiences constructs related to self expand, and there occurs self/other overlap, as more of the others and of the world is included in the self (Yaden et al. 2017, 10). Unlike peak-experiences, experiences of self-transcendence involve also negative experiences such as forms of psychosis. Mystical experiences, ego-dissolutions, peak-experiences and other experiences of self-transcendence have a group of fascinating after-effects. Sudden changes in values, behavior or metaphysical outlook has been recorded in psychological literature since William James (1902) (for a recent review, see Yaden et al. 2017). Surveys examining large amounts of self-reports have also found support for the claim of positive effects of these experiences (Yaden et al. 2016). (For a review article, see Barrett & Griffiths 2017).

2.3 Transformations Induced by Psychedelics

Often psychedelic experiences can be very intense but inconsequential (Masters & Houston 1966, 34). But sometimes in the right circumstances, psychedelics can induce

transformative processes that facilitate profound changes in the well-being, in existential orientation, worldview and values of a person, especially if required integrative work is done after the experience. This holds especially with experiences explored above. Already in Pankhne's (1963) classic study that aimed at inducing mystical experiences by giving psilocybin to theology students, most of the participants had a mystical experience, still affirming the transformative quality of their experiences in a follow-up study 25 years later (Doblin 1991). Recent studies into psychedelic-induced mystical experiences began when Griffiths et al. (2006; 2008) published a paper that replicated the study done by Pankhne. Over half of the participants experienced a mystical type of experience. Instantly after and in the follow-ups 2 months and 14 months after the experience the majority of subjects evaluated the experience as one of the top 5 most significant experiences in their lives, comparable to the birth of their child or getting married. The conclusion from this and later studies is that in experiential settings psychedelics reliably induce mystical experiences and these experiences have been found to significantly contribute to psychological well-being (Griffiths et al. 2006; 2008; Dakwar 2014; Majic et al. 2015).¹⁵

2.3.1 Change of Values and Personality

According to recent studies psychedelics can alter certain personality traits, beliefs and values. Empirical studies support that psychedelic use in therapeutic settings may change foster prosocial behavior. Psychedelics might, according to studies by Griffiths et al. (2011) enhance empathy and prosocial behavior through mystical experiences they induce. For example, in the studies led by Griffiths 61% of the subjects rated that the experience was associated with moderate to extreme positive behavior change still 14 months after the experience (Griffiths et al., 2008, 2006). Ballesteros refers to older studies of Pahnke (1963) and notes how in this study after six months "the experience had made them [the participants] appreciate more deeply the meaning of their lives and motivated changes such as being more sensitive to the needs of others and feeling more love toward others" (Ballesteros 2019, 744). The increased altruism and prosocial behavior have been especially strong in cases where subjects have experienced psychedelic induced mystical experience, suggesting a general link between self-transcendence and prosocial behavior

¹⁵ A rise in subjective quality of life, lifting of various ailments such as depression and anxiety in terminally ill patients (Griffiths et al. 2016) and addiction (Garcia-Romeau et al. 2016) have been observed as consequences of psychedelic-induced mystical experiences, the effects being the more therapeutic the more the experience qualifies as mystical (Carhart-Harris & Friston 2019, 336–337).

(Griffiths 2011; Yaden et al. 2017). In qualitative study done on cancer patients, Belser et al. (2017, 8) report about the theme of 'relational embeddedness'. Five of thirteen participants reported improved relationships after the treatment. Many reported seeing their loved ones in a new way and with deeper clarity, and changes as increased forgiveness towards themselves and other humans (Belser et al. 2017, 8–11). Also, in the study of Noorani et al. (2018, 8–9) altruism and prosocial behavior were reported by participants as significant results of the treatment. A sense of increased attunement to others, interpersonal sensitivity, and a feeling that one is able to glimpse some significant understanding about others are often reported in psychedelic experiences (Shanon 2002, 143; Masters and Houston 1966).

On the level of personality traits – relatively enduring traits and disposition of experience and behavior – psychedelic drugs have been noticed to increase optimism (Carhart-Harris et al. 2016) and 'openness to experience', which is one main cluster of Big Five personality model, a leading personality theory in psychology (McLean et al. 2011). Imagination, aesthetic sensitivity, enhanced sensitivity to inner experiences and emotions of others and oneself, a desire for variation and intellectual curiosity are examples of factors in this cluster. McLean et al. (2011) observed an increase in openness both immediately and year after the ingestion of psilocybin, suggesting a long-term change. Also, a correlation between completeness of mystical experience and increase in openness was observed. Only those who had experienced a mystical experience by study's standards retained the benefits after a year. Openness to experience has been found to be linked in itself with antiauthoritarian views and environmental engagement, which have been independently observed to follow from psychedelic use (Nour et al. 2017). Openness to values is also one aspect of openness to experience. If the openness to experience is increased, so is the susceptibility to change of values: people with a high degree of openness to values are the ones most likely to reject traditional norms and traditions (Nekljudova 2019, 79).¹⁶

¹⁶ It should be acknowledged that this capacity for causing re-evaluation of societal values can be a double-edged sword. Psychedelics might have a kind of dionysian element, stemming from their power to disrupt conventional moral beliefs and values, as the counterculture born in the 60's well attests. The positive side is that psychedelics might foster the desired social changes and work as an antidote to the inertia of habit and traditional values that slow down change. On the other hand, psychedelics might also foster social fragmentation and elicit backlash-reactions from the conservative side of the society, if the change is too fast (as we might interpret the 60's). If the old societal values are teared down, but the person does not continue the inquiry to find more constructive values, one might end into a nihilistic position, rejecting that there is any kind of good. Although it also might be that psychedelic change of values has certain autotelic or self-guiding properties to directions that are constructive, as it often widens the frame of reference, and might reveal the being values. It is possible that the context of use matters a lot: Griffiths et al (2018) found that spiritual practice combined with psilocybin also increased values related to tradition in

According to emerging empirical literature ecological, spiritual and liberal values might be enhanced as a consequence of psychedelic use. Lyons and Carhart-Harris (2018) reported that as a side-effect after treating major depression with psilocybin, treated patients (N=7) experienced increased connection to nature and a decrease in authoritarian political opinions compared to a control group. In one year follow-up these changes were still observable. Forstmaan and Sagioglou (2017) observed based on a questionnaire (N=1478) that life-time psychedelic use predicted more environmentally friendly behavior. This difference was mediated by the degree the participants identified themselves as part of nature. This might be related to the changes in the experience of the self associated with psychedelic experiences although this observational study could not establish the direction of causality. Recently Kettner et al. (2019) in a prospective study observed increases in nature-relatedness after use of psychedelics and found that this effect depended on the extent of ego-dissolution and perceived influence of natural surroundings.

Nour et al. (2017) concluded based on an internet survey (N=893), that lifetime use of psychedelics, but not alcohol or cocaine, predicted liberal political views, openness to experience, a sense of connection to nature, and correlated negatively with authoritarian political views. Studerus et al. (2011) found that “38 percent of 110 subjects reported [that their psychedelic experiences were followed by] a positive change in their relationship to nature, while 37 percent reported enhanced appreciation of art and music”. Griffiths et al. (2006, 2008) reported based on observations from an experimental study that healthy volunteers after a psilocybin treatment experienced positive changes in their attitudes toward life, improved mood and greater altruism. This self-report was further corroborated by observations from relatives and close ones of volunteers. Lerner and Lyvers (2006) observed in a survey that psychedelic users (N=88) valued spirituality more than average, were more caring about others and valued economic success less than average. Users also rated their life as more meaningful than non-users. Although acknowledging possible

Schwartz value survey. Also, in the context of traditional use of psychedelic substances in indigenous societies there seems to be no social dislocation or disruption of traditional values caused by these substances. Perhaps the experience is so malleable that when properly integrated in a cultural setting the dionysian element is eliminated. Or, perhaps the values and way of life of these traditional societies is more congruent with psychedelic experience and values it fosters (like relational focus, spirituality, antiauthoritarianism, nature relatedness etc.). Yet another possibility is that a long tradition of societally integrated psychedelic use has changed society in a certain direction. The situation in the West in the 60's was exceptional as these substances were, as a big practical joke, introduced into societies 1) lacking existing traditions to imbue their use or give cultural meaning to the experiences, and 2) endorsing highly individualistic, consumerist, goal-oriented and secular values.

sources of bias, and the possibility of alternative explanations, authors in a commentary article propose that going through altered states might be the source of the observed differences (Lerner ja Lyvers 2004, 10).

In many cases psychedelics can change the deep-seated valuations and perspectives on the world without changing propositional beliefs, as attested by change of values or by deeply significant but ineffable mystical experiences and ego-dissolutions, which can increase the sense of felt meaningfulness and connection to the world without affecting propositional beliefs. Although in some cases psychedelic experiences can radically shake the foundations of one's Weltanschauung also on level of beliefs. In overall it seems to be a property of psychedelic trips that they might loosen very high-end beliefs about the nature of self, about the metaphysical nature of the cosmos, of consciousness et cetera – beliefs underpinning religious and metaphysical orientations (Carhart-Harris & Friston 2019). The direction or quality of these changes is not determined, although some commonalities are observed (Letheby 2016, 36; Shanon 2010, 269; Carhart-Harris et al. 2014; with Friston 2019, 336; Lerner and Lyvers 2006; Griffiths et al. 2019).

2.3.2 Evaluating the Rationality of Psychedelic Transformative Processes

In the light of these changes, psychedelic experiences could be considered as transformative experiences in the sense L. A. Paul (2014) uses the term. According to her, transformative experiences are experiences which shake the very foundation of valuation and meaning making of the person in case and are thus philosophically and existentially tricky. She has raised the question can the entering into such a state be a rational choice, if the outcome can be new values and ways of seeing highly discontinuous with the former values, thus creating a break in the evaluation criteria of what is deemed desirable. Deeply existentially shaking processes have a difficult epistemic status as the person from beforehand does not know what it will be like to be the person who has undergone the transformation. An example used by Paul is a person who is offered a reliable chance to get transformed into a vampire. The problem is that the person has no idea what being a vampire would be like: the perspective after the transformation and prior to it are highly discontinuous. Similar problems of discontinuity and change also figure in aspirational processes, that is, voluntary processes of change to become a certain kind of person – for example a person who appreciates classical music – which have been explored by Agnes Callard (2018).

An immediate concern is that these changes in outlook and values after psychedelic experiences – although they accidentally might be helpful – are somehow irrational,

overriding rational deliberation and thus not respecting the autonomy of the subject (cf. Windt 2011; Lavazza 2017; Roche 2010). We know that psychedelics increase suggestibility (Carhart-Harris et al. 2015). Thus, these changes might be caused just by some subtle suggestions coming from the context, the therapist or contingent cultural associations that have been imposed on psychedelics. Even when practically helpful, they would in this case override rational deliberation which should be the source of our values.¹⁷ This might be morally problematic. Are the changes in values in the case of psychedelics a result of some kind of rational or ordered process, even a source of learning of some kind, as for example Shanon (2010) suggests when speaking about ayahuasca as a kind of school? Or are they in a sense irrational or arbitrary, like a club on the head or an unguided random electric storm in the brain? Do they retain autonomy, or are the changes coercive (more like brainwashing or more like voluntary attending to a school)? It would greatly reduce the problematicity of the situation, if it could be shown that there operates some intelligible processes that give reasons to change the values in some direction, processes that are either rational or at least cohere with rational deliberation instead of going against or undermining rationality. The line of argumentation pursued here tries to do exactly this. Before giving answers to these questions, let's survey the existing discussion on psychedelic moral enhancement to build a better foundation and context for my arguments.

2.4 Psychedelic Moral Enhancement

2.4.1 The Concept of Agential or Indirect Moral Enhancement

Moral enhancement is the project of trying to improve human morality by various means, primarily motivated by the concern that moral capacities of *homo sapiens* are lagging behind the immense cultural and technological development we have witnessed (Earp et al. 2017). Moral neuroenhancement means the project of fostering morality by chemical or neural interventions (Earp et al. 2017, 4). In overall, the empirical evaluations of current proposals for moral neuroenhancement have been quite cautious, accompanied by views that the currently available interventions – most of drugs, transcranial magnetic stimulation et cetera – do not work, since they are too 'blunt instruments' and their effects unspecific to moral domain (Earp 2018; Dubljević & Racine 2017).

¹⁷ Although also the claim that our values are or should be based on rational deliberation could be contested from empirical grounds. Maybe a more plausible claim would be that in an ideal case our values should be open for corrections by rational deliberation.

Recently psychedelics have been discussed in this context and pointed out as one promising alternative (Earp 2018; Earp et al. 2017; Tennison 2012; Ballesteros 2019; Ahlskog 2017). These authors have found support for psychedelics' potential as tools for moral neuroenhancement from the mentioned empirical findings: the increased prosocial behavior, their ability to enhance openness and to change patterns of behavior – many of which are associated with mystical-type experiences. For example, Ballesteros (2019, 751) argues that these changes “point to the formation of a morally improved individual, better equipped to deal with different moral challenges”. Noteworthy is also the ecological implications Ballesteros (2019, 751) and Germann (2019) have drawn. Ballesteros (2019) argues that psychedelics by increasing openness and nature-relatedness could boost our moral imagination and help with dealing with the ‘moral blindness’ we are facing in our relation to technology and future, and help us to liquidating the psychological inertia that makes us unable to respond to the scientific consensus about the urgency of great changes into our lifestyle. Germann (2019) proposes that by fostering environmentally friendly values and by enhancing creativity psychedelics could be helpful for countering the ‘anthropocene’, the human-caused ecological catastrophe stemming from short-sighted overconsumption.

Earp et al. stress that moral neuroenhancement should be facilitatory, agential and indirect (Earp et al. 2017; Earp 2018). Their point is that morality should not be tried to be enhanced by chemical or neural interventions by trying to dial-up some specific variable (such as particular moral emotions like empathy or specific motives or behaviors). This has been found to be a bad idea, since our moral cognition and behavior are such complex processes, that they hardly can be fostered by enhancing any single trait or behavior without high context-sensitivity (Schaefer 2015; Earp 2018, 4; Earp et al. 2017, 169–171)¹⁸. For example, just dialing up empathy might be a bad idea because it is not clear that this is in every situation a morally desirable thing, and might also threaten autonomy (Earp et al. 2017, 169–171; Ahlskog 2017, 365–370). Instead the proposal is that a more reliable way to agential moral enhancement would be augmenting higher-order capacities, like the capacity for moral reasoning, to “modulate one’s moral responses in a flexible, reason-sensitive, and context-dependent way” (Earp 2018, 171). For example, the capacity to context sensitively learn when to be empathic would be a much better outcome than the increased empathy per se. Thus the proposition is to use neurotechnologies (such as

¹⁸ Although for example attention and other cognitive capacities have been proposed to enhance morality (Ahlskog 2017).

psychotropic drugs) to facilitate indirect changes in the moral agent by augmenting some relevant higher-order capacities involved in morality.

Earp et al. (2017, 174) further highlight this augmentative role of moral neuroenhancement by responding to critical point voiced by Robert Sparrow (2014) who contrasted reading Tolstoy, an activity that gives reasons for moral behavior, to the purportedly less reliable and autonomy-threatening chemical means. Earp et al. replied by dismantling this false dichotomy by suggesting that Tolstoy might be read or reflected while under the influence of a neurotechnology that enhances moral learning, stressing the importance of “robust educational or learning context”, and “critical engagement with some kind of actual moral ‘content’ (e.g., ‘norms or values’)” while engaging in moral neuroenhancement (Earp et al. 2108, 174). Tellingly, the prime example Earp et al. (2017) use for this kind of moral neuroenhancement are precisely psychedelics utilized in traditional societies in rites of passage ceremonies which involve moral dimensions:

The mental states induced by such drugs, according to anthropologists, are intended to “heighten” moral learning “and to create a bonding among members of the cohort group” (quoted in Haidt, 2012, 266). Notice the words “enhance,” “catalyze,” and “heighten” in these quotations, which suggest a facilitating rather than strictly determining role for the hallucinogenic drugs in these societies, administered as part of a richly contextualized process of moral learning. (Earp et al. 2017 174–175)

These examples quite well capture a central point about psychedelic moral enhancement endorsed by Earp et al. Moral enhancement should be done precisely in a fashion that engages the world by going into themes or experiences that might foster moral learning, augmenting the natural learning processes – for example to facilitate reflection on relevant themes or the sensitivity to relevant features of the world. Clearly the point is *not* to determine any specific morally helpful changes in the subject's moral behavior or beliefs. Rather, the hoped for effect is that the state induced by psychedelics combined with a meaning-rich context, perhaps in combination with other suitable techniques, might facilitate moral learning by boosting the engagement of the agent with the world in a way that is conducive to moral learning. As Earp (2018, 18–19) puts the point, psychedelics could in this conception “foster states of mind that that allowed one to engage with the moral domain in a more productive or insightful way, storing away any lessons learned for application in the ‘real world’ once the effects of the drug had worn off.” Thus, psychedelics would be adjuncts, not the crux of moral learning and this leaves as stated by Earp (ibid.) “plenty of room for active, non-superficial engagement and intentional moral learning”. I endorse and

adopt this position of the agential or indirect conception of moral neuroenhancement in my account of psychedelics as enhancers of moral perception.

2.4.2 Contextual Factors

It is worth noting that not only traditional rituals but also modern therapeutic studies of psychedelic drugs employ meaning-rich context, careful preparation and subsequent integration of the experience. Historically the use of psychedelic plants has been embedded in a ritual context, to aid spiritual and moral purposes. They have been, to use term of Ron Cole-Turner (2015), a form of ‘spiritual enhancement’, and have been used in a cultural set and setting or matrix that supports these aims (Tupper 2002, 503; Earp et al. 2017, 174–175; Ballesteros 2019, 741–742; Hartogsohn 2017).¹⁹ Individual and collective set and setting are of paramount importance for the purported moral benefits of psychedelic use. In general, it seems that psychedelic experiences in themselves do not guarantee anything, as many elders of psychedelic culture readily admit (numerous examples can be found in Roberts 2001 and Walsh & Grob 2005). It seems that a set of factors have to converge to make the experience morally useful. Some psychedelic experiences may involve unselfing and morally beneficial effects, but since the experience is complex and self-organizing, the context of the experience is crucial. Further, the morally enhancing effects brought by psychedelics might be greatly enhanced by the optimal context and discipline utilized afterwards that the experiences would be worked out in such a way that makes a difference for everyday life (compare Ballesteros 2019, 751; Earp et al. 2017, 175; Earp 2018; Tenneson 2012).

Psychedelic experiences are not always morally enhancing. There are anecdotal cases that point to the direction that psychedelics are no magic pills that make people moral exemplars. For example, the Concord Prison Experiment done in the 1960’s by Timothy Leary and others sought to help prison inmates to reduce the rates of recidivism by giving psilocybin to inmates (Doblin 1999). This experiment failed to reduce the levels of recidivism,

¹⁹ Although a critical examination of different rites of passages and ceremonies is required. They might involve some dimensions that are morally salient, but others that are not. A central part of almost all spiritual traditions deals with a shift from egocentric salience to wider frames of reference, which – it is argued here – is inherently morally salient. At the same time psychedelics also enhance suggestibility and might be used purposefully or non-purposefully to indoctrinate a person to a certain worldview. A gruesome example is the initiation rituals of some branches of *bwiti*-religion which included ingesting more and more of the psychedelic iboga root until the initiate encountered certain spirits of endorsed belief system: otherwise the initiate might be killed, and also might die from an overdose of iboga, which unlike many other psychedelic substances, has serious somatic risks (Dobkin de Rios 1996, 161–172).

probably contributed by the fact that little support was provided for the prisoners after the experiment.²⁰ As Rick Doblin in his follow-up study states:

[T]he failure of the Concord Prison Experiment should finally put to rest the myth of psychedelic drugs as magic bullets, the ingestion of which will automatically confer wisdom and create lasting change after just one or even a few experiences. Personality change may be made more likely after a cathartic and insightful psychedelic experience, though only sustained hard work after the drug has worn off will serve to anchor and solidify any movement toward healing and behavior change. Psychedelic drug experiences are not sufficient in and of themselves to produce lasting change. (Doblin 1999, 18)

Further to reconsolidate the position that psychedelics are no magic bullets, there are cases where movement to the opposite direction of moral enhancement might happen.²¹ For example, there is the risk of developing certain kind of arrogance, which has been anecdotally observed especially in younger users, and it has been suggested that psychedelics would best serve psychologically mature individuals who have already done self-exploration by other means (Stolaroff 2005, 67; Masters & Houston 1966, 259). There are also anecdotal reports of ego-inflations associated with psychedelics – a phenomena of overt and ill-founded narcissistic over-certainty in oneself that is especially related to LSD (presumably with suboptimal set and setting) – but not discussed in recent scientific literature. Psychedelic drugs might bring an illusory sense of moral superiority caused by fancy experiences and the sense that one is part of psychedelic in-group of some sort (cf. Masters & Houston 1966, 259). There is a risk of getting attached to peak experiences, to reify them, and to make them part of egocentric narratives without showing changes in life that could be seen as signs about real moral improvement.²² Thus the claims below do not

²⁰ However, there is a recent empirical study that points to decreased recidivism for those prisoners who had used psychedelics before going to prison, when these and other prisoners who had history of substance abuse were compared (Hendricks et al. 2014)

²¹ There have been cultures where clearly unethical practices such as human sacrifice have coexisted with psychedelics use, as with the case of Aztecs (Dobkin de Rios 1996, 137–149). On the other hand, in the case of otherwise extremely peaceful Piaroa people of Amazon psychedelic use is embedded in shamanism that is espousing a semi-paranoid cosmology obsessed with endless invisible warfare in supra-material levels of reality between different spirits, gods and sorcerers, that has constantly to be defended and retaliated against (Graeber 2004, 26–27; Rodd 2008). On a cultural level psychedelic use seems to be able to coexist with various kinds of beliefs and practices and might even feed to a worldview estranged from the realities of life to collective fantasies. Although the evaluation of cultural beliefs, cosmologies and values and understanding their relation to the change of values of individuals is a highly complex and difficult issue.

²² The even more gruesome counterexamples to the belief of psychedelics as magic bullets are cases related certain cults and military organizations that have used psychedelics for brainwashing,

include all psychedelic experiences but are possibilities inherent in the synergistic combination of the use of psychedelic substances and other supporting conditions.

2.4.3 Missing Explanations and My Proposal

Although some promising effects have been observed, the specific reasons and mechanisms by which we could understand the effects delivered by psychedelics are yet poorly understood both in empirical literature and in current discussion on psychedelic moral neuroenhancement. Earp (2018), Tennison (2012) and Ballesteros (2019) stay on a very general level, and rely more on observed empirical changes, and do not account for these changes from a philosophical or cognitive point of view. The *explanans* offered for these empirically observed changes, mystical experiences, is left as a kind of a black box. But why does, for example, mystical experience foster these changes in behavior or openness? How can they be philosophically understood or explained? The following argument might be understood as providing a philosophical framework to understand the observed changes in prosocial behavior and changes in values as result of these experiences.

The themes centered around unselfing and moral perception explored in this work have not been discussed in current moral (neuro)enhancement literature. Only exception is Alhskog (2017) who argues that moral enhancement should target self-interest and cognitive capacity and mentions psychedelics and meditation as possible means. He set out a theoretical model supported by empirical evidence that supports a connection between decreased sense of self, decreased self-interest and thus increased prosocial motivation. He argues that one promising way to increase altruistic behavior is to decrease self-centered behavior, and this can be done by decreasing the sense of self, preferably combined with general cognitive enhancement, since this would lead to use of limited cognitive resources in the direction of altruism, if there is some altruistic traits to begin with. Although even this treatment only superficially touches on the issues of self-interest and self-centered motivation and does not assign values are any proper place. The framework explored in the following chapters could substantially enrich this account by giving a more encompassing framework to understand the evaluative changes involved in psychedelic experiences. Further what I am going to argue next explains not only the narrowly moral benefits that psychedelic might have, but also ties these to possible benefits for living a flourishing life.

including the Aum Shinrikyo famous for the Tokyo sarin gas attacks of 1995, Manson family that conducted group of murders in the 60's, and CIA which had its clandestine military operation examining the potential of LSD in chemical warfare (Germann 2019; Kaplan & Marshall 1996).

Assuming that observations above concerning change of values are hinting to real changes occurring, that psychedelic are not merely used by people who already have certain valuations, but also cause these certain changes in values – although more research is clearly needed – I offer a philosophical account for understanding at least some of these changes. I focus on the phenomenon called unselfing that often takes place in psychedelic states and can offer a robust account for or at least help to understand many of the observed changes. Unselfing involves two interrelated aspects that could work as common denominators behind a variety of changes in values and personality traits: general perspectival widening and the shift of valuation from egocentric instrumentality to intrinsic valuation. In certain psychedelic experiences our personal self and all the associated instrumental goals become less salient. Thus, a shift in perspective away from a narrow egocentricity or ingroup-centeredness to wider cosmological, ethical and ecological wholes might be enabled. Psychedelics seem, at least occasionally, open people to see the world less from the categories and cognitive constructs that they are used to. The world can be seen more in terms of things as they are independent of their relevance for our lives. Such experiences enable one to see the world less from an instrumental and egocentric viewpoint, undo certain filters of one's own personal history and future plans and shift thus the valuation from instrumental to intrinsic values. Psychedelic induced peak-experiences, mystical experiences and ego-dissolutions would be an important factor for these kinds of changes, presumably combined with relevant set and setting.

3 Unselfing

I argue that a meaningful epistemological process related to our capacities to evaluate the importance of what we perceive, and to situate ourselves in relation to the environment is involved in these changes of values observed after psychedelic experiences (Kettner et al. 2019; Yaden et al. 2017; Lerner and Lyvers 2006; Nour et al. 2017; Studerus et al. 2011; Forstmann & Sagioglou 2017; MacLean et al. 2011). This process involves deep, pre-linguistic layers of cognitive processes. I will call this process 'unselfing', a term borrowed from Iris Murdoch. Unselfing is a process where the salience attributed to ourselves is reduced, and our attention freed to the otherness of the world regardless of its importance for our goals and wants. By overcoming egocentric attributions of salience the frame of reference and context for evaluating the importance of things is widened. Thus, from this viewpoint the changes in the values can be understood not as random nor irrational, but as

involving a meaningful epistemic process where our evaluative perspective is detached from egocentric trajectories. The process can happen in various degrees and be either momentary or more long-term. In this chapter I argue for the existence of this process in general. In chapter four I connect this process to the theme of moral perception, and then in chapter five to psychedelics.

According to Murdoch, unselfing is a process of striving towards selflessness, a process “wherein [one] learns to see, and cherish and respect, what is not himself” (Murdoch, 1992, 17; Ohlsson 2018, 168). As Ohlsson argues, for Murdoch this meant directing attention from the self towards the world. Unselfing is a “morally transformative process characterised by engagement and attunement to the surrounding world that highlights an intertwinement of goal and process” (Ohlsson 2018, 165–168).

Why did Murdoch find this process valuable? For both moral and epistemic reasons: the ego and associated egocentric attention was for Murdoch a main obstacle for both directing the attention to the world and for living a virtuous life:

By opening our eyes we do not necessarily see what confronts us. We are anxiety-ridden animals. Our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying veil which partially conceals our world. (Murdoch 2001, 84) [...] The self, the place where we live, is a place of illusion. (Murdoch 2001, 93)

Thus, the self is a place of illusions, creating a ‘falsifying veil’ which partially conceals what is real. The self, if not wholly illusory, at least contributes to a misguided manner of perceiving reality. Thus, the movement to less egocentricity can be seen as movement towards more accurate perception of the world (Panizza 2019, 3–4, 15). The stance I take is that egocentric perception is especially an evaluative bias in our perception of the world, biasing both how we direct our attention and what features of the world we see as salient.

3.1. The Multifaceted Self

What is meant by the ‘self’ we are unselfing is not a trivial question. I will not venture too deeply into the area of philosophical questions about the nature of the self, but it should be acknowledged that there are a lot of different conceptions about the self (compare Millière 2017, 10). The kind of philosophical commitments we have in this respect are going to affect our views about the processes described below. I propose that in order to understand Murdoch’s unselfing and connect it to other relevant discussions of this thesis we have to consider at least two concepts: narrative self and salience. These are required and

necessary for conceptual understanding of the issue, although other aspects of the self might be involved in both unselfing and psychedelic experiences. Before explicating this point, I will unpack views concerning self that might help us to situate these terms and understand what is involved in overcoming the egocentric perspective.

3.1.1 The Construction of the Self

For Murdoch the self was a place of illusions (Murdoch 2001, 93), although it is ambiguous did she think of the self in itself is an illusion or that it is just a source of illusions. The stronger claim that self is in some way illusory is espoused by various philosophers, both western and eastern as well as modern and ancient (Albahari 2006, 132–138). Support for this view has been found also from psychedelic ego-dissolutions (Letheby & Gerrans 2017), and from other similar phenomena of altered self-experiences (Metzinger 2004).²³ Both Letheby and Gerrans (2017) and Albahari (2006) think that the phenomenal, experienced self purports to be a permanent, enduring and unitary entity even if it is not. For them the sense of self is an illusory reference point: there is no substantial and enduring self beyond the mere sense of self and thoughts about self. The position here is that self is at least a construct maintained by our neural and psychological processes (assuming that mind and neural system are deeply intertwined in fashion of neutral monisms or panpsychism or emergent materialism), and might even be an illusion in a stronger sense, although this is not required for the argument.

However, the positions that self is constructed or illusory could help us to better understand unselfing, as they give accounts of how our egocentric perspective is constructed. Letheby and Gerrans (2017) propose that our experience of the self is in fact a model created by hierarchical predictive processing in the brain, binding together different information streams in our brain, and attributing the streams that are born from within the organism to one unitary construct.²⁴ Albahari (2006) analyzes the issue from a first-person,

²³ This illusoriness or constructedness of self can mean slightly different things and come in different degrees. Of course, constructedness or illusoriness does not mean that something is totally unreal. We could say that many phenomena are constructed but still in some sense real, like is the case with certain cultural artifacts like money. Thus, the self, although it is constructed or illusory, has some kind of intersubjective reality. According to the definition used by Albahari, something would be illusory if and only if it is a construct and yet purports to be unconstructed. Something is a construct if and only if that something “does not exist beyond the appearance, of which it is the content”. On the other hand, something would be unconstructed if, and only is, it exists beyond the appearance of which it is content. (Albahari 2006, 127).

²⁴ For Letheby and Gerrans (2017) the self is an illusion because this predictive model does not fill the criteria that would be required from a real, substantial self. This complex structure that we call

phenomenological perspective, complementing Letheby and Gerrans. She claims that a pre-verbal and elementary sense of 'me' and 'mine' is created when a) certain objects of awareness are identified with, and b) others are set into a relationship of ownership based on this elementary sense of self, that is a illusory central locus, owner and agent of objects of consciousness. This identification is transparent to the subject, and the situation feels more like the selfhood is being revealed or reflected than created. As Albahari (2006, 6–16, 51–61) argues, on a more basic subject-object relationship which is required for any experience and gives a situated subjective perspective to our experience, a more complex structure differentiating the self from the world is continuously being erected by these mechanisms of identification and ownership. Thus, some part of our experiential objects are identified with or imbued with ownership. The result is a *gestalt* of perception, a seeming unification of the subject with various objects of awareness and a viewpoint to the world as conditioned through these objects of identification, for example our body and thoughts (Albahari 2006, 57–59). As Glaserfeld and Varela (1987, 6–7) put the point, a cut is made "between the part of our experience that we come to call 'ourselves' and all the rest of our experience, which we then call our 'world'". The self is a prominent construct to structure our experience. This elementary sense of self can be seen from a biological perspective as a practical construct for maintaining the complex living system a human is. For example, Huxley thought that the whole function of our biology is to narrow down consciousness in a fashion that is biologically useful (Huxley 1954; Swanson 2018).

A related and useful distinction is between self-specifying and self-related processes (Millière 2017, 10-13). We – as other animals – as a biological necessity distinguish those processes which originate from within from those that originate from outside. The self-specifying processes are those which demarcate the self from the other. They are thus more fundamental, and used in distinguishing efferent and afferent signals, that is, between signals originating from the organism itself and which originate from the environment (Millière 2017, 10-13). Sense of self is clearly related to this demarcation process necessary for survival, for us to recognize which of the objects is our body and has to be protected. On the other hand, self-related processes are built on this base of more elementary specification and demarcation of self from the world. These processes include for example self-related thoughts and reflexive self-consciousness. They already assume a self as a point of reference and are intimately related to the self. Sense of self combined with these self-

self is not unitary and is built from many layers and parts. Self is a bundle of different top-down models, sensory streams and conceptions tied together.

related processes function to constrict our perspective, to make our personal (and our in-group's and important other's) viewpoint, wants and aversions salient, something also very useful for survival as a member of a human group.

3.1.2 The Minimal, The Embodied and The Narrative Self

This lines up nicely with another important distinction, between minimal, embodied and narrative aspects of the self (Millière 2017, 9–10; Zahavi 2008)²⁵. The **minimal self** is bare subjectivity in experience, not yet demarcating a self as an object of experience except a certain perspective from which the world is witnessed (cf. Albahari 2006, 7–9).²⁶ On top of minimal self – a bare subject of experience – other forms of selfhood are being erected, as we develop both ontogenetically and evolutionarily. First the bare minimal subjectivity acquires body, as some parts of the field of experiential are integrated into the self. The **bodily or embodied self** is demarcated by these self-specifying processes. Embodied forms of selfhood specify the self from the rest of objects of awareness (“I am this body, not that chair”). The bodily and minimal self thus denotes fundamental and embodied forms of selfhood that precede language, that for example non-linguistic mammals supposedly possess (Millière 2017, 16–19).

On top of these even more complex structures such as narrative self is built via self-related processes. The **narrative self** is constructed as the ‘center of gravity’ of our autobiographical narratives. This conception of ‘me’ is fleshed out by linguistically articulated personal identity, is built in relation to social and cultural factors, and linked with attitudes, beliefs and memories related to self (Millière 2017, 10-11). As we learn to tell stories and formulate beliefs about ourselves and articulate these to others and in our heads, the overall fabrication of experiential perspective around a self is strengthened. This process of narrative fabrication further reifies the self or ego by increasingly complex verbal narratives

²⁵ The analysis offered in Millière (2017, 5, 9–10) and Millière et al. (2018) is more nuanced and involves aspects related to agency and social dimensions.

²⁶ A confusing factor is that Letheby & Gerrans (2017, 7) use the terms minimal and bodily self as synonyms, whereas Zahavi and others use these as distinct concepts. In one interpretation the minimal selfhood is implemented through self-specifying processes: in this case it is further it is debatable whether minimal/embodied phenomenal selfhood is a salient or perceptible feature of our experience under normal conditions, or should it more be compared to a background hum that goes unnoticed until disrupted (Millière 2017, 10, 14). In another interpretation the minimal selfhood is a precondition of all possible experience, for it is given from a certain perspective, irrespectively of correlates or explanations on neural or cognitive level (Millière 2017, 10). I will translate the ‘minimal or bodily self’ in Letheby & Gerrans terminology as bodily self to avoid conflation of these different definitions of minimal selfhood and reserve the minimal self to even more minimal perspectivalism or ‘subjective givenness’ of our experience from a certain viewpoint.

which gravitate around the center of self formed by these narratives. These narratives built further layers of orientation and self-reference which bound our attention even more strongly towards the self and self-related objects. With this coarse sketch of the construction of the self lets zero in on the salience.

3.1.3 Evaluative Aspects of The Self

What this structure called self allows, is the filtering of sensory data according to its importance in relation to the self. We could say that:

Salience is the *experiential importance (or importance experienced) in relation to different objects of experience* (internal objects such as percepts, bodily sensations, feelings, thoughts, and external objects perceived in the environment).

Of course, salience in general is very malleable by all kinds of factors, such as voluntary use of attention: when you turn your attention into some feature or thing (let's say, your right foot), it suddenly becomes a salient feature of your experience. However, in many ways our perception of salience is inherently linked to our selfhood. These factors in how our sense of self affects what we see as salient could be termed as evaluative aspects of selfhood.

To take a simple example: for a dog very salient is her body, those objects of awareness that are sensed to be part of her embodied self. If something – another's dog's teeth, foot of an ill-willed human – concerns or threatens this part of the dog's experiential field, it is of prime importance and gains lots of salience. After this, other dogs, food and the owner are attributed more salience and relevance than for example flying objects such as birds or objects in the environment that do not afford eating or social interaction. A sofa fitting for a dog's body is a more salient object than a table that cannot be climbed upon et cetera. Some objects are more relevant, more important than others, and this calculation of relevance is both closely related to the attribution and construction of the self, and to how the environment is filtered and perceived in the light of these appraisals.

Salience is related to both narrative and embodied aspects of self (Letheby & Gerrans 2017).²⁷ The narrative self functions in tandem with more elementary forms of

²⁷ We might go as far as seeing the sense of self, or identification, and salience in a codependent relationship. Letheby & Gerrans (2017; 2019) defend a view like this from the perspective of predictive processing theory, proposing that the networks associated with salience are crucial in how different sensory inputs and aspects of self are integrated into one coherent field of experience (Burnston 2019). Similarly in buddhist philosophy the sense of self, the feeling tones of sensory

selfhood, and crucially enhances our evaluative selfhood, as we gain ability to fix our attention to events that have happened in the past or will happen in the future that are relevant to the self, or that are related to self by some symbolic manner that is not immediately given in our perception (for example identifying with one's country or religion). Our more explicit and verbal conceptions of ourselves, autobiographical narratives and the more experiential, perceptual quality of felt importance associated with different objects of awareness intermingle in colouring the perception of the world, thus casting a certain salience landscape²⁸. We see the world from a certain angle, biased and filtered by the evaluations associated with our embodied and narrative perspective.

Although it should be noted that I do not want to say that the existence of evaluative selfhood and egocentric salience makes us egoistic in a stronger sense. Thus I will preserve the terms **egocentric** and **egoic** to the processes that constrain the perspective and salience around the self, and will use the term **egoism** and **egoistic** to denote a more narrow phenomena of selfish motivation and action in the social and moral sense. A distinction between **egoism** as a character and behavioral trait opposed to **altruism** is a very different thing than the egocentric perspective that is the crux of the present argument. Altruistic persons, who value other persons greatly and have the goal of helping others as a central goal can also be in egocentric perspective as it is defined here, albeit to a lesser degree than egoists. Their construal of self and self-related salience and narratives just includes other persons (as is probably the case with most people to some extent). Egocentric salience constricts altruists and egoists alike (although egoists even more strongly). To take another example, people suffering from low self-esteem are often not egoistic in this stronger sense although low self-esteem and related anxious worries are highly egocentric phenomena. To sum up, the crucial aspect of selfhood for egocentricity and for the process of unselfing is how our perspective is constricted by the egocentric evaluations related to the self.

3.2 The Process of Unselfing

3.2.1 Unselfing, Salience and Autobiographical Narratives

My interpretation is that Murdoch primarily has in her mind this egocentric attribution of salience, or evaluative aspects of selfhood, when talking about unselfing. In this view the

objects (*vedana* in pali) – fundamental forms of egocentric evaluations – and craving or wanting (*tanha* in pali) are all mutually causing and constructing each other (Burbea 2014; Macy 1991).

²⁸ The term 'salience landscape' is from John Vervaeke.

unselfing would be minimally a process where the salience, experienced importance in relation to different objects of awareness, and attention are increasingly decoupled from the fictions created by our autobiographical narratives, called 'fantasy' by Murdoch (1997, 354). As Ohlsson writes:

In the narratives of our lives we often cast ourselves as the protagonists, as a centre around which other things revolve. The greatest threat to morality is the creativity of our own mind and its tendency to narrate where there is no story, to fabricate, to make the contingent whole, and to embed meaning in that which is meaningless. (Ohlsson 2018, 168–169)

Narratives – whether autobiographical or otherwise – create meanings which make the world intelligible to us and situate us to the world. Crucially, narratives filter what is important in our environment and in the world, and thus possibly distort our view on reality, as they are always fictions that choose some elements of the whole as important and set these elements into a narrative frame. The important point here is that especially the narratives that are related to us as persons and to our social milieu strongly contribute to the egocentric attribution of salience. They in a sense make us and the people around us the center of the world as protagonists of these narratives: and the experienced salience holds even though on an intellectual level we know that we are not the center of the world (as perhaps a crude egoist might think). Thus, these narratives that govern our attention in an egocentric fashion significantly contribute to the egocentric perspective. A huge amount of salience is attributed to these narratives, to the point of egocentric consciousness of human adults, who have their heads full autobiographical narratives – a near constant commentary – centered around their self or ego. These narratives easily take the attention from the environment to sequences of thoughts we are entertaining. Even when we are not consciously entertaining these narratives, they still contribute to egocentric appraisals and ways of paying attention that color and filter the world with biased salience based on a whole imagined-to-be-real apparatus of the self.

Further this autobiographical ego has a tendency to overgrow and form a strong locus of psychological energy. Murdoch writes that egocentric fantasy, “the proliferation of blinding self-centered aims and images [...] is itself a powerful system of energy” (Murdoch 1997, 354). As Denham reads Murdoch, a central obstacle for our attention and imagination directed to the world, is a tendency to give value only to that which is connected to our concerns and interests (Denham 2001, 624). Our egocentric fantasies are our obstacle to

freedom, because they divert our attention from the world as it is. Thus, the world is instead seen from the perspective Abraham Maslow (1971, 249–255) called ‘deficiency cognition’, a perception colored by the unfulfilled needs and desires we have, or from the egocentric instrumental viewpoint Erich Fromm (1976) termed ‘the having mode’.

On top of delineating our ability to see things from wider perspectives, ego is also a very powerful self-reinforcing structure of thought, motivation and action. In egocentric states action is oriented in line of what Maslow (1971, 249–255) called ‘deficiency motivation’: that is, motivation based on fulfilling some kind of unfulfilled need or want in order to get something that is relevant for us. We are constantly immersed in satisfying some goal or another, just in order to seek the next: a phenomena termed ‘endless striving’ by Schopenhauer and *tanha* by buddhist (Denham 2001, 623–4; Albahari 2006, 24–27; Schopenhauer 1966, 164). This attention diverting egocentric striving is difficult to leave behind, since it also constructs illusions which fulfill or satisfy our psychic needs (Denham 2001, 623–624).

Of course, having a well-functioning ego is also very valuable for us to be able to go on in our daily lives and in our instrumental pursuits, actually quite necessary for any kind of sustained and directed action. Some kind of structure for voluntary control and agency, and for maintaining a stable viewpoint and identity is obviously needed for any kind of moral action or autonomy. Similarly, our autobiographical and narratives serve many valuable functions. It could be even argued that unselfing as a practice requires having an ego in this sense of controller of psychic energy and as a source of agency. To unself, the total annihilation of the self is not required, but a more modest re-attribution of salience. The overt attribution of egocentric salience is thus a reasonable target for unselfing. The egocentric perspective can easily become quite constraining, our autobiographical narratives can become impenetrable fences between the world and us, and our existential perspective can become stuck in the mode of egocentric evaluations. Arguably the ability to be able to visit other kinds of perspectives is both existentially and morally important.

3.2.2 Unselfing and Perspectival Change

We could classify some states with relatively high egocentric perspective as **egocentric states**, where the identification is on our ordinary self, personal ego, or me as a person. The attribution of salience is often closely related to the autobiographical narratives and the goals related to these. The egocentric perspective constricts us to a limited temporary-spatial perspective. Being overwhelmed by anger, agitated by strong craving, thinking about

monetary gains or losses or trying to manipulate somebody are examples of states where the perspective is quite egocentric and constricted. In these even more egocentric states than the average, the sense of self is more solid and more the perception narrower, far from unbiased, just or clear perception.

When the egocentric perspective is loosened more or less radical shifts in perspective or in one's position in relation to the world are felt (Ohlsson 2018, 168–169). Examples from these directions could include states of empathy or strong connectedness to others, or experiences of wonder and awe while contemplating the vastness of the universe, or just general quiet contentment when nothing is especially troubling us. In these kinds of states when we are more open, less entangled and fixated by our egocentric concerns we are also more able to exercise just deliberation and see the world from a wider perspective, to open beyond our instrumental goals. The possibility and importance of perspectival changes to a less egocentric direction are crucial for the argument. When egocentric attribution of salience is disrupted or relaxed, it can reset or refresh the evaluation of the situation to a wider frame of reference or context. The evaluative perspective can widen both temporally and spatially. This movement can happen in a more limited way from an tightly constrained egocentric perspective to a less constrained but still egocentric perspective, to encompass wider circumstances of one's life that one had been in a sense absorbed into: for example a movement from narrow achievement-oriented mindset to a comprehensive grasp of one's fuller life context. Also the widening can happen to a context that better involves other people around oneself, or, even from personal to transpersonal or universal viewpoint.

The egocentric salience can widen to include others and situate the self as part of a larger social group. We can also inhabit **allocentric states**, stemming from an identification with the human group. In collective endeavours the sense of self can to a degree or another shift to the human collective (a couple making love, the sport-team playing, the division of the army or the whole nation waging a war might be examples), and these kinds of states might be more default for some cultures and for some individuals. In these states the salience is evaluated more from the perspective of a collective larger than the individual. Still the process of calculating and attributing salience is similar: it is done from the perspective of some delineated part of the whole, albeit larger than the ego.

For this work important are what could be termed **cosmocentric states**. These might be defined as states where the salience is not evaluated from the viewpoint of the self or the collective. When the perspective widens far enough, our self begins to drop out from

the picture and we end up in a state of horizontal transcendence: for example, while contemplating the cosmos and the transience of ourselves and the people around us. Or similarly states of immersion and absorption – one subtype of peak-experiences for Maslow (1980, 243) – can take us away from egocentric perspective, for example while immersed in the minute breath-taking detail in a petal of a flower, or in deep meditative states. In both of these states especially the autobiographical machinery of our cognition becomes very silent. Sometimes the self-construct might even be obliterated or become all-encompassing, as in psychedelic ego-dissolutions or states explored by transpersonal psychology. Thus a state of flattened salience occurs, which often manifests itself as the detachment of concern from ordinary attribution of salience. These states are often experienced as alignment with the totality of things, or as self-forgetful absorption.

Thus, depending on our attribution of salience and identifications, a variety of different centerings and perspectives can be taken. We can picture a continuum from an imagined totally biased **egocentric perspective**, to an equally idealized totally **cosmocentric perspective**²⁹, in which one's perception is not hindered by idiosyncratic biases or egocentric concerns, our personal gains or losses, to the slightest degree. These totally egocentric and cosmocentric ends of the continuum are ideal, and extremely rare if not impossible in real life. Most perspectives people find themselves in would fall somewhere in between.

Employing this continuum of different centerings, we could frame unselfing as movement towards the cosmocentric end of the spectrum. Unselfing could thus be defined also as moments of transcending the egocentric identification, salience or both. The point is that when unselfing, i.e. disidentification or shifts in salience happen, the centering of the experiential perspective changes. In the process of unselfing certain structures of evaluation are altered, and the world is thus revealed more as it is and less coloured by egocentric salience. In the terminology of Vervaeke (2013) our salience landscape and perspectival and participatory forms of knowledge are altered, thus relocating our experiential position to the world.³⁰ Unselfing might take us to different kinds of existential modes, that is, different ways of framing the relation between ourselves and our environment than the egocentric and instrumental orientation we often inhabit. Examples include the 'being mode' Fromm

²⁹ The term 'cosmocentric' is taken from a side clause of Abraham Maslow (1970, 96).

³⁰ So far Vervaeke has not published work elaborating all these themes: the cited article discusses only part of these. Themes of perspectival and participatory knowledge and existential modes are further elaborated in a 50 part lecture series of Vervaeke, 'Awakening from the Meaning Crisis' that can be found on YouTube.

(1976) writes about which is concerned with being instead of goal-oriented 'having mode', the 'being cognition' or peak-experiences of Maslow (1970), the 'sub specie aeternitatis' of Spinoza (2018) et cetera.

This does not mean that the 1) perspectival uniqueness of different subjects is obliterated (cf. Albahari 2006 on perspectival ownership), nor even that 2) our sense of self is totally obliterated (although this might in some cases happen, as in psychedelic ego-dissolutions). Lessening of egocentric perspective does not necessarily mean a 'view from nowhere', using the phrase of Nagel (1986). The perspective would still be subjective, but not colored by processes of identification and egocentric attribution of salience. Albahari (2006, 31–50) argues for a similar point in the context of the perspective of buddhist sages. It is important to differentiate egocentric centering and existential perspective from a given sensory perspective on the world. The point of view in the spatiotemporal continuum and how that continuum is given through our senses might stay the same: even in allocentric or cosmocentric states I am looking through my eyes and sensing the sensory feedback from my body (although in some altered states even these kind of perceptual and embodied perspectives can change or dissolve) (compare Albahari 2006, 8; Millière et al. 2018). However, the relevance of the framing that it is *me* inhabiting *my* body and looking through *my* senses diminishes greatly. The point is about the perceived importance: what is deemed important and relevant and what is the perspective governing the evaluation of things, our imagination and our thinking. How, then, are these shifts in perspective affected?

3.2.3 Reorienting to the World

Of course, the degree of egocentricity of our experiential states naturally varies from moment to another, and through our life. The experiences we go through can move our perspective to either more or less egocentric states. However, we are not without resources to deliberately overcome egocentric tendencies, as Denham (2001, 624) observes. The attitudes and actions we choose can also either widen or narrow our perspective. Furthermore, there are certain kinds of techniques that affect our perspective in an enlarging manner. Basically, anything that widens the perspective or frame of reference of our evaluations is potentially useful for unselfing. To begin with, let's come back to Murdoch's conceptions of attention.

In general, attention modulates the salience that is attributed to things: things that we attend to become more salient. The problem is that often our attention is directed precisely by our habitual egocentric attributions of salience. To unself, the thing is to find a

style of paying attention that is able to overcome the habitual tendency to pay disproportionately much attention to our egocentric appraisals of the world.

For Murdoch attention – a term she borrows from Simone Weil – was important for this movement of unselfing, for overcoming our biased perspectives (Murdoch 1997, 327). Attention that enables the unselfing to happen was a special kind of attention: “a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality” (ibid.). For Murdoch this love means attention that is directed to reality in order to really look. This attentive, self-forgetful way of paying attention frees us from the bondage of egocentricity. As she writes:

It is in the capacity to love, that is to see, that the liberation of the soul from fantasy consists. The freedom which is a proper human goal is the freedom from fantasy, that is the realism of compassion. [...] What counteracts the system [of egocentric fantasy] is attention to reality inspired by, consisting of, love. (Murdoch 1997, 354)

The freedom from egocentric fantasies is affected by loving attention that counteracts those “convincingly coherent but false pictures of the world” that we so easily build (Murdoch 1997, 329). For Murdoch the crucial factor that makes attention a moral achievement is “not found in the specific cases in which an agent is able to see the suffering of others but in all cases in which the agent sees the world aright as a result of the suppression of self” (Clifton 2013, 211–212).

This attention related to unselfing has also relational aspects: in human relationships loving attention to others, opening to the individuality and concreteness of their needs is both a result and a means of unselfing. As Anna-Lova Olsson (2018) analyzes in her article, by unselfing we move our attention away from ourselves and progressively become to see and recognize our interdependence with the world, and open to the perspectives of others. A famous example used by Murdoch (1997, 312–318) is about a mother-in-law who after a compassionate re-examination sees her daughter-in-law in a more just perspective, and thus is able to overcome her earlier framing.

Other sources also support the idea that certain ways of paying attention are conducive to unselfing. Vervaeke and Ferraro (2016) have proposed that mindfulness as a cognitive style is fostering the process they call relevance realization. Mindfulness enables us to learn to see how we are attributing salience, and this can help in order to overcome the habitual ways. Interestingly, Murdoch was also influenced by Zen meditation in his thinking about the loving attention (Panizza 2019, 3–4). Perhaps both metacognitive capacity to realize when we are governed by egocentric salience and the intention to really

look – love – are required. So, the right kind of attention is a crucial factor in unselfing. Basically, anything that fosters this kind of attention to the world and to other people, anything that tunes us to the world not in a manner that is dictated by what we beforehand find important but by the manner that the world represents itself is helpful for unselfing.

Other ways of unselfing such as encountering the beauty of nature or art are both common and familiar (Denham 2001, 624). The perception of beauty in both art and nature as routes to less egocentric perspective were an important theme for Murdoch. A moment of exaltation by art or nature can free us. For example, good art connects us with “the minute and absolute random detail of the world and reveals it together with a sense of unity and form” (Murdoch 2001, 86). Conversely real art, Murdoch claims, is born out from attentive and lucid seeing. The nature, as well as art, can by its beauty to free us from egocentric ruminations back into connection with the world (cf. Murdoch 2001, 84). On top of these also intellectual disciplines direct the attention to reality. In all these cases our faculties of imagination do not self-servingly circle around egocentric fantasies but connect us to the world:

In intellectual disciplines and in the enjoyment of art and nature we discover value in our ability to forget self, to be realistic, to perceive justly. We use our imagination not to escape the world but to join it, and this exhilarates us because of the distance between our ordinary dulled consciousness and an apprehension of the real. ...The love which brings the right answer is an exercise of justice and realism and really *looking*. (Murdoch 2001, 90-91)

Many other things can affect our state of consciousness in beneficial, egocentricity-reducing ways. Certain techniques for training attention, cultivation of virtues and why not also philosophical reflection to adapt a wider perspective or even science as a reach towards the universal could be seen as falling under this umbrella. Various traditions of ethical and spiritual self-cultivation – such as some forms of buddhism, certain philosophical schools of antiquity and contemplative branches of different religions – have developed techniques that can move us towards wider perspectives (Pagnoni 2019; Burbea 2014; Millière 2017; Millière et al. 2018; Hadot 1995; 2004). Unselfing thus can be seen as a very perennial theme, having played a central role in many ancient religious and philosophical traditions that aimed at a deep transformation of our existential perspectives.³¹

³¹ For example, quotes from Albahari (2006) are from a book that defends the position that underlies the whole project of buddhist contemplative way of life. The crux of this grand contemplative tradition is overcoming the illusory belief in the self, and thus transcend the root

Finally, also experiences such as mystical experiences, ego-dissolutions and peak-experiences are such powerful tools for altering the experiential perspective in direction of cosmocentric perspective. This includes psychedelic experiences as they are associated with these experiences as elaborated in the last chapter, as well as cause other perspectival shifts that I explore in chapter 5. As is especially clear with these experiences of radical self-transcendence, unselfing involves not only intellectual or propositional shifts in the perspective. The experiences, acts and techniques discussed align multiple aspects of psyche – such as perception, motivation and emotions – away from egocentric perspective. As Vervaeke and Ferraro (2016) analyze, these changes do not affect just propositional but also deeper levels of knowing and participating in reality. They involve non- and pre-propositional levels of knowing, and can thus radically restructure the salience landscape, as for example peak-experiences exemplify.

3.2.4 Peak-Experiences: Perceiving the World as It Is

According to Maslow perception is during peak-experiences (abbreviated as PE's from here on) extremely acute, and happens with exclusive, full and tremendous concentration which is not ordinarily experienced. The world is experienced freshly, unlikely during “the normal blindness” which makes us miss the wondrousness of the world (Maslow 1970, 78). Maslow claims that during PE's there happens a shift in gestalt-perception, bringing about a view from an altered centering point. The accustomed way to perceive reality collapses and is organized to a new framing (ibid.). During these experiences the reality is either perceived as a single unified, undivided whole with oneself belonging to it, or a part of the world is perceived as it were the whole world (Maslow 1971, 249). The figure and ground of these experiences are not so clearly separated, and all perceived things become equally important (Maslow 1970, 60). Maslow stated that these experiences metaphorically “enlarge” us, make us “taller” and thus more able to perceive than in our ordinary state of being (ibid., 62).

The cognition in these states can be characterized as ‘being cognition’. Maslow (1971, 241–255) contrasted the deficiency cognition (and related deficiency motivation) discussed above to ‘being cognition’ and ‘being motivation’, which are ways of relating to the world not based on deficiency and appreciate the world from intrinsic value of the situation or object at hand. Maslow claims that:

source, *avijja*, ignorance about the true state of affairs, to overcome *dukkha*, the unsatisfactoriness of life. A variety of contemplative techniques are used for this end, many of which reorient the attention away from habitual patterns, cultivate mindfulness about the workings of the mind, and directly change the perspective to such that is deemed to be closer to reality.

The cognition of being (B-cognition) that occurs in peak-experiences tends to perceive external objects, the world, and individual people as more detached from human concerns. Normally we perceive everything as relevant to human concerns and more particularly to our own private selfish concerns. In the peak-experiences, we become more detached, more objective, and are more able to perceive the world as if it were independent not only of the perceiver but even of human beings in general.” (Maslow 1970, 61)

Thus peak-experiences are self-transcending, egoless and unselfish experiences, even to the point that they are almost personless, impartial and free from wanting. The world, things and other persons are seen less from the viewpoint colored by our wants, needs, plans and memories, and more in-themselves, as they are in their suchness. (Maslow 1970, 61, 78). Perception is relatively free from evaluations, comparisons and judgements, and becomes more object- than self-centered (ibid., 62). Thus, the perspective becomes more cosmocentric, more free from egocentric attributions of salience. PE's and similar states enable perceiving the world with significantly less egocentric biases than our ordinary waking consciousness, enabling us to perceive the world more as it is in itself.

I thus propose that peak-experiences, ego-dissolutions and mystical experiences could be interpreted as are momentarily visits to a different kind of centering point which sets ego or the self into a new framing or context. The salience experienced in relation to the world and the self is in these new perspectives very different from the ordinary. For example, more connection, awe and wonder might be experienced in relation to the world. What is deemed to be valuable or perceived to be good might change: as elaborated in the next chapter. Maslow described the knowledge gleaned and the perception into reality during these experiences not as learning of new facts, but recognition of things that had been true all along but without the subject noticing it (Maslow 1970, 80). This fits with the notion that they – along with other techniques for unselfing – give perspectival or participatory knowledge, not knowledge about new facts (cf. Letheby 2019; Vervaeke & Ferraro 2013).

3.2.5 The Results of Unselfing

These momentary changes in perspective can bring changes to attributions of salience after the experience. When the ordinary perspective is resumed, there might be more or less subtle changes induced in the cognitive system and to the attribution of salience. Also, unselfing can be a self-reinforcing process. As the egocentricity weakens it becomes easier

to pay attention to reality in a self-forgetful way, and to enter into peak-experiences and similar rewarding states and modes of being (cf. Letheby 2017, 633-638). Maslow was not interested only in momentary peak-experiences but also studied what he terms self-actualization, and the role peak-experiences played in this kind of more long-term trajectories of development. He claims that for some cognition resembling peak-experiences had become an enduring trait, and not just a momentary grace of fortuitous moments (Maslow 1970, xiv-xvi; Maslow 1971, 270–286). The being cognition, momentarily glimpsed in peak-experiences, could become available outside these experiences, he claimed.³²

Recent psychological research supports the claim that peak-experiences and the other experiences of self-transcendence can induce lasting changes in the subject (Yaden et al. 2017, 7–9, 11–12). These states – such as flow-states, psychedelic states, peak-experiences and meditative states, all characterized by reduced salience attributed to the self – induce an increased sense of connection and a complementary increase in salience attributed to other things. Related to this perspectival widening is a set of emotional and attitudinal responses. Emotional states such as compassion, awe and gratitude are closely related to unselfing, as both possible results and causes. This whole bunch of experiences have been observed to be conducive to mental health: empirically, self-transcendent experiences have been linked to increases in wellbeing. Prosocial effects, increased altruism and prosocial behavior, and also the sense of “social and spatial unity” is also observed to be a general effect of experiences of self-transcendence (Yadet et al. 2017, 10-12).

Perhaps in these states the mental structures that are creating the sense of separation are less active, culminating in the sense of unity experienced in peak-experiences and mystical experiences. This line of thinking is supported by recent neuroscientific observations related to neural dynamics that correlate with the sense of self (Millière 2017, Millière et al. 2018; Letheby & Gerrans 2017; Letheby 2017a, 634–635; Lebedev et al. 2015). According to recent tentative findings, for example the default mode network and the salience network are closely correlated to the experience of self, and to the salience tied to self-representations. Salience network is proposed to be related to our self-

³² It is a tempting option to posit that the unselfing, at least in sufficient amounts, produces enduring changes in character. Certain humans such as self-actualizers Maslow wrote about, or people who have committedly practiced in contemplative traditions have probably more or less permanently had their perspectives altered to the direction of cosmocentricity. Supporting evidence could be gleaned from studies done on long-term practitioners such as those reported by Goleman and Davidson in their popular book (2017). More scientific studies about long-term effects of meditation see also Srinivasan (ed.) (2019)

specifying processes which tie our verbal narratives related to self to a more bodily and experiential sense of importance and selfhood (Millière 2017, Letheby & Gerrans 2017). Default mode network has been connected to autobiographical self (Millière 2017; Andrews-Hanna et al. 2014).³³ Certain parts of both of these overlapping neural networks have been observed to be downregulated as a result of self-transcendence. Especially reduction in activity in the area called posterior cingulate cortex (PCC) is observed both after meditation practices and psychedelic use (Millière et al. 2018; Brewer et al 2013). Letheby has pointed out in his discussion of psychedelic spirituality that one naturalistic reason for observed changes in reduced sense of self and salience attributed to self are the disruption of these neurocognitive systems that give “rise to the illusory sense of a separate sense and constrain cognition and consciousness in accordance with representations of the goals, priorities, and predicaments of that self” (Letheby 2017a, 639). Thus, we have empirical support to the claims that ‘ego’ and ‘identification to the ego’ have physical correlates, and the changes in perception involved in unselfing can be supported even from a physicalist or naturalistic viewpoint. We will resume these themes in the last chapter, when unselfing is connected to psychedelic experiences.

4 Unselfing and the Perception of Values

As discussed, psychedelic and other experiences of self-transcendence have been observed to lead to changes in valuations (Yaden et al. 2017; Lerner and Lyvers 2006; Nour et al. 2017; Studerus et al. 2011; Forstmann & Sagioglou 2017). Both in the light of anecdotal data and recent research into psychedelic ego-dissolutions and similar phenomena, it is plausible that these changes are somehow related to the process of unselfing, that is, weakening of the egocentric perspective (Letheby 2017a; Letheby & Gerrans 2017; Millière 2017; Millière et al. 2018; Carhart-Harris; Nour et al. 2016; Nour et al. 2018). Further, the process of unselfing and the associated change of values are not something unique to psychedelic experiences (Yaden et al. 2017; James 1902). Thus, we need a general explanation to understand these evaluative changes.

³³ A significant similarity should be noted between the autobiographical self supposedly underpinned by default mode network and Murdoch's (1997, 354) “powerful system of energy” consisting of self-centered fantasies and aims. Although the issue is complex and DMN also has a variety of tasks. Carhart-Harris and Friston (2019, 322) suggest it to be a neural correlate of ego, introspection, meta-cognition, secondary processes in general and many others processes, many of which might be crucial for functioning for human adults.

In order to build a framework to understand the changes of values in a fashion related to the process of unselfing, in this chapter I argue that unselfing in general enables better grasp of values, especially of the intrinsic values. In the process of unselfing, the filter of egocentric evaluations which would orient us to see things as they are instrumentally useful to us, is substituted by loving, non-discriminating and non-egocentric attention to the world. Detaching our centering from the ordinary egoic position enables us to see beyond our egoic and habitual evaluative conceptions and biases. The personal self, or ego, is after all the epicenter of the vast majority of our instrumental pursuits. The more cosmocentric we are, the more able we are to perceive and conceive the inherent value of the world and its parts such as objects and actions as independent of their instrumental utility for ourselves. When the evaluative perspective widens, we can transcend the partial perceptions and conceptions of values stemming from our egocentric perspective, and more readily connect with intrinsic values (such as beauty, truth, justice, goodness, the value of nature etc.). According to this line of thinking the processes of unselfing and self-transcendence can work, at least in some occasions, as a kind of evaluative tuner leading to the perception of intrinsic values.

I provide support for these claims by referring to Iris Murdoch's views on moral perception, which gives a certain understanding of the relations between perception, conceptions, values and unselfing. Another important influence is Abraham Maslow, who connects what he called Being-values, peak-experiences and self-actualization closely together. The argument pursued here is at least one possible and promising way to understand the change of values and value-perception in peak-experiences and psychedelic experiences (discussed in the next chapter). In this view peak-experiences could be conceived as maximal deconstruction of the partial and egocentric perspectives of value, and as optimal states for perception of intrinsic values. The phenomenology of peak and mystical experiences could be valuable for the debate about moral perception too. PE's (including psychedelic-induced) might be occasions where even thin moral concepts or values might be perceived. Perception of the being-values, which are universal, abstract and non-instrumental, is a stronger form of moral perception than thick concepts which Murdoch focused on. Thus being-values of Maslow are an interesting example of a strong variety of value perception. To situate these later discussions, I will first discuss ways to understand values and moral perception on a more general level.

4.1. Ways to Grasp Values

4.1.1 Different Conceptions of Moral Perception

In general, the philosophical claims we are dealing with in this chapter are closely related to the concept of moral perception (abbreviated as 'MP' from here on). The idea of moral perception is one way to understand our moral experience. Väyrynen defines it as follows:

Moral perception: at least some moral properties figure in the contents of perceptual experience (Väyrynen 2017, 4).

I contrast this view with a Murdochian account of moral perception. She argues for a form of moral perception that involves both values realism and the claim about the relevance of the moral state of the perceiver for the perception of values, as Panizza (2019, 4) underlines:

Claim 1: The perceived reality has a moral quality, i.e., a) values and moral facts are part of reality, and b) values and moral properties can be perceived.

Claim 2: The moral state of the perceiver – virtuousness, degree of egocentricity et cetera – affects both a) perceiving in general, and also b) the perception of values and moral properties.

What is exactly involved depends on the variety of MP in question. One issue between different accounts of MP is which moral properties are claimed to figure in the perception. A useful distinction here is between thin and thick moral properties (Väyrynen 2016). The claim that thin properties (such as good/bad, right/wrong etc.) figure in the perception is a stronger claim than that only thick properties (such as courageous, tactful, selfish, boorish, and cruel) are part of perception. Another issue is about the mechanism of moral perception: why or how do moral properties figure in perception? One popular answer is to resort to **cognitive penetration** (abbreviated as CP from here on). Cognitive penetration is the claim that two different subjects have different perceptual experiences under the same external conditions because their differing cognitive (or affective) states such as background moral beliefs or moral concepts cognitively penetrate the perceptual experience (Panizza 2019, 10-11; Siegel 2010; Väyrynen 2017, 8).

In general, at some level this claim that moral judgements, moral facts and values figure somehow in our perceptual experience is not very controversial. If I, let's say, perceive a person hitting a child, the evaluation about the injustice has not to be waited for or explicitly inferred, but occurs immediately, seamlessly connected perception if not in the perception. Still the idea of moral perception has received criticism. For example, Väyrynen (2017) argues that claims of moral perception related to thin properties which rely on cognitive penetration do not give any theoretical benefit (judged by general theoretical virtues) and are less compelling to certain other ways to account for the fact that moral properties can make a phenomenological difference to our overall mental states in a given situation, such as resorting to affective factors and background moral beliefs combined with implicit transitions in thought. For him moral properties are not perceived but more likely implicitly thought about. Väyrynen uses the example how a trained physicist might have the disposition to reliably track the presence of protons by looking at a trail of vapor bubbles in the cloud chamber, based on trained skill to perceptually infer their presence as *contents* of perception, even if we do not want to say that she perceives protons in literal sense (Väyrynen 2017, 12–13). Although criticizing literal moral perception, he finds common ground in that both moral perception and other accounts can agree that moral properties are represented in certain overall phenomenological experiences, whether this representation is strictly perceptual or not (Väyrynen 2017, 5).

Murdoch evades this criticism in two ways. She argues for a weak variety of MP which centers on views about conceptuality of perception and thick moral concepts: for her perception is inherently conceptually structured and evaluative. She does not argue that thin moral properties figure in perception, although some thick properties do. Further, Panizza (2019, 5–6) argues that Murdoch contests the supposition Väyrynen and other critics of moral perception are making: that non-evaluative perception grasps all the significant facts. For Murdoch evaluation is not something that occurs after perceptual processes, since she questions the fundamental divisions between evaluation and perception, and between facts and values.

However, to take in the critique offered by Väyrynen, for our purposes it might be enough to endorse moral perception in quite a loose sense. For the present argument it is not crucial whether perception of values (such as beauty, truth, justice, goodness etc.) or other moral facts (for example, seeing something as right or wrong) occurs strictly in the perceptual components of experiences, or whether it is more plausibly located outside the perceptual components of overall phenomenal experiences. Important is that moral facts and values

somehow figure in our overall phenomenological experience, in a way that is tightly coupled with perception. As Väyrynen (2017, 6) also points out, whether we accept moral perception in the strong sense or not, it is still plausible that that perception can help us to get a clearer moral gauge of things. Thus, the argument does not require a strong form of moral perception. Although, the possibility that at least some of the relevant content figures perceptually is not excluded either. Accordingly, I will use the words 'perception' and 'moral perception' in a loose manner, denoting mostly to the fact that the relevant evaluative or moral content is present in the overall phenomenal experience in a manner that makes them directly cognizable in a manner that is very similar to perception, at least from the subjects experiential point of view.

As a second reservation, it should be acknowledged that the argument here does not require that *all* moral facts, values or judgement are perceptual, or that they are *only* apprehended through perception or immediate experience. It is enough for the argument that certain values *can* figure in perception or in the overall phenomenal experience. Minimally what is argued here for is that: 1) unselfing induced changes in the manner the values figure in our overall phenomenal experience, and that 2) this process of the unraveling of egocentric evaluation culminates in peak-experiences (and other similar experiences of self-transcendence).

4.1.2 Different Ways to Understand Values

For the present argument the most relevant moral evaluations are those related to values. Values can be understood at various levels. First, often what we mean by values is some kind of subjective guiding principles within the individual or within the human collective which in a sense tell what is important and give direction. These can be either explicit conceptions or implicit conceptions reflected practically in people's valuations embodied in actions and use of attention. Psychological questionnaires, on which our explanandum is based on, of course measure explicit values people have. Another common and useful distinction is that between intrinsic and instrumental values. Some things such as money are valued because of their instrumental value, and others are valued without there being external or ulterior reasons – perhaps works of art, truth, happiness or nature (although the issue has nuances I'm not able to cover here, see Schroeder 2016). Especially when I link moral perception and unselfing together, and discuss Maslow's being-values, this notion is helpful for understanding how the evaluative changes associated with unselfing and perceived values

are connected. It seems that the inherent value of things as independent of their instrumental utility for the self is especially what is revealed during the experiences of this kind.

Secondly – to connect values to moral perception – values can be understood as somehow figuring in phenomenal and perceptual experience. Values are reflected not only in our actions and thoughts, but in other domains of our experience as well. As argued in chapter 3, evaluation is a pervasive aspect of our phenomenal experience, and all of this evaluation clearly does not occur by mediation of explicit thought. We constantly evaluate things in a complex manner. We intuitively see some things more salient than others: they attract our attention and others do not. It could be said that attributions of salience are, in a sense, attributions of value: not abstract conceptions of value but practical and action-oriented conceptions of values, which mold our conceptions by filtering certain features as salient. But then there are also moral evaluations which are more complex, reflected for example in our thick moral concepts: we (hopefully) see the hitting of a child as atrocious or disgusting. Certain things are seen *as* something, or *through* a certain conceptual phrasing (hitting of the child is seen as wrong or as disgusting, through these value-laden concepts). As Murdoch (1997, 329) claims, our attention and conceptual ways of seeing continuously build perceived structures of value around us. Our conceptions, salience, and perception of value seem to hang together. Our conceptual framings of situations with associated perception of value operating at any given moment seem to be configurations of perceived salience: they single out certain features of the perceived as important.³⁴

Further we have even more abstract and universal forms of values such as thin conception about beauty, good, truth and such. The more abstract the value, the more controversial it is to claim it can be perceived non-inferentially in phenomenal experience. It is one thing to argue that the values we have are somehow affecting our perceptual experience, and that they are reflected in thick moral concepts, or figure as properties of the perceived objects, so that I see certain pieces of art *as* beautiful or *as* sublime. It is another thing to claim that the values themselves (such as beautifulness or goodness) are perceived. Also, in this case it is a less demanding claim that I perceive the beauty *in* the piece of art, than to claim to perceive the beauty *in itself* (as Platon claims to happen in *Symposium*). I consider these options in the following sections, respectively with Murdoch and Maslow.

³⁴ To make this picture more dynamic and complex, it could be claimed that we have a potential storage of different ways to perceive ourselves and the world and the relation between these from our past experiences, but not all ways of perceiving are active at the same time.

Thirdly, if value realism is granted, values can refer to certain aspects and properties of reality: they could be pictured as configurations or *gestalts* (overall patterns and part-whole-relations) of reality. For example, all (veridical) instances of perceived injustice might be perceptions of certain kinds of patterns of behavior (fraud, blackmailing, theft etc.) which together form a wider moral pattern (injustice) when these tokens are connected together. Injustice would then be a concept that captures the meaning of these temporal and spatial patterns.³⁵ On the other hand, as in the case of Maslow's Being-values, these can also be taken as descriptions of the whole reality, as a highly unitative way to perceive the world. If a value realist position is taken and values are conceived also as some kinds of patterns *in* reality or patterns *of* reality, it would be only natural that they can be perceived or cognized with high enough intersubjective regularities.³⁶ If this epistemic meta-ethical claim is granted, values could be grasped either in an inferential manner or as objects of direct perception as certain *gestalts* of perception (this option is further clarified in relation to B-values Maslow talked about). In this view also the strict separation between facts and values in a sense collapses: instead we have values and value-laden concepts that both describe reality and are normative in relation to the perceiver. Both Murdoch and Maslow argue against fact-value separation, and have quite monistic view of values, as we shall see.

4.2 Murdochian Moral Perception

In this section I elaborate on Murdoch's views on moral perception, which are one possible way for understanding certain changes in valuations that are intimately tied to the process of unselfing. Further Murdoch's account of moral perception is in certain respects highly consonant with recent cognitive theories utilized also in the study of psychedelics, although this theme is not pursued further here.³⁷ As a general context, Iris Murdoch argues against

³⁵ According to a Platonic take we could say that values as these kinds of universal meanings are in this way themselves atemporal and non-spatial (cf. Shanon 2002, 248-251).

³⁶ Although it is logically possible to hold a skeptic position that values are objective/intersubjective but cannot be epistemically grasped.

³⁷ Murdochian moral perception (as interpreted by Panizza 2019) fits remarkably well with the predictive processing paradigm (cf. Carhart-Harris & Friston 2019; Carhart-Harris 2018b; Swanson 2018; Pink-Hashkes et al. 2017; Hohwy 2013; Clark 2016). They both agree on the point that inner changes we go through changes the concepts we use and the meaning of concepts have for us. We can synthesize these by saying that Murdoch's concepts are kind of top-down predictions in the language of predictive processing framework. These concepts or top-down models do not only highlight but also reveal or hide certain features of the world or of the perceived objects. Perception is not about seeing a given set of facts that is shared by every perceiver looking at the same scene. What we perceive is a matter of the accuracy of our models and what they single out. On the perceptual level different conceptual phrasings and different moral concepts *are* different ways of

the main currents of moral philosophy of her time for a picture of man and of morality that can accommodate the possibility of the Good and progression towards the Good in human life (Cooper 2019, 4–6). Murdoch endorses a realist view of morality and values, and at the same time stresses the internal, personal and perceptual dimensions of morality.

Murdoch espoused a monistic form of moral realism centered around the notion of the Good. The Good was for Murdoch not so much of a metaphysical reality than an inevitable way for us to perceive and conceive the world as moral beings (Ruokonen 2002). As Ruokonen interprets her, perceiving value is an integral part of our cognition, and the Good might be seen as an ultimate limit of the perceived value that can be endlessly approximated but never totally reached (like a mathematical concept of infinite limit value) (Murdoch 2001, 93, 101–103). The unreachable absolute value of the Good can be discovered as something that structures the whole reality including our cognitions, since they always have an evaluative dimension and are thus always structured by an orientation to the Good (even if we can be misguided what good is) (Panizza 2019, 8). As Panizza (2019, 8) notes, for Murdoch the Good is thus in a double-aspect position: on the other hand it is an imperceptible thin guiding ideal of the Good, and on the other hand it is reflected in our thick moral concepts³⁸ or ‘secondary moral words’ (Murdoch 1997, 317). The idea of the Good transcends us, but is also continuously fleshed out and refined by how and what we perceive (Panizza 2019, 8; Murdoch 1997, 348, 350, 361). According to this realistic perspective the mind does not *project* value but comes to *perceive* it through encountering it in the world (Panizza 2019, 8). We do not create value but are created by value as moral agents (Ruokonen 2002, 212). Value governs not only the mind but also the world, as it is presented in human perception.

How does this perceptual and conceptual fleshing out -activity happen? How are the perceived values related to non-moral properties? Denham (2001, 608–616) interprets that Murdoch espouses supervenience: the values and other moral configurations would be thus higher-order, complex relations in the world, which would supervene on the physical world of scientific ‘facts’ and their base properties, forming a distinct world of ‘aspectual’ facts. Denham draws an analogy between moral perception and perception of musical harmonies:

perceiving, different top-down processes molding the perception. In the example the mother and daughter-in-law Murdoch (1997, 312–318) expresses a morally relevant process of change in the internal organization of the cognitive system. This congruence with predictive processing, which is a theory frequently used in recent work on psychedelics, makes Murdoch a good choice for analyzing psychedelic experiences.

³⁸ Bernard Williams, who popularized the term thick moral concepts, as Panizza points out, claims to have heard the underlying idea from Murdoch (Panizza 2019, 7; Williams 1985, 218).

there would be a similar supervenient relationship to the objective facts as perceiving musical harmonies or rhythms is to perception of discrete notes or beats, the base acoustic properties of sounds. Similarly to musical harmonies, when we perceive someone acting justly we perceive his character or conduct as embodying certain virtuous patterns and regularities, which are neither arbitrary nor subjective. Perception of values could be seen thus as a kind of pattern recognition.

Panizza (2019, 3–4) argues that Murdoch's view was not supervenience, but a more radical attack on the whole division between facts and values espoused by such philosophers as Hume (1739) and later R.M. Hare (1952). In the reading of Panizza (2019, 9), the distinction between facts and values blurs because perception does not present the world as non-conceptualized sense-data, but "via an evaluative concept-using activity". Similarly, the neat distinction between moral and non-moral concepts blurs (*ibid.*). In this view our perception – both in the case of values and perception in general – is fundamentally conceptual and evaluative, and thus perception inevitably involves perceiving the world as having a certain value-laden conceptual structure (*ibid.*, 3–4, 8, 13).

Both agree that the perception of values, as aesthetic evaluations, are perceivable only from first person perspective, are non-inferential and particularistic (Denham 2001, 608, 615 618). As other perceptions, perception of values depends on our internal structure and our position, and it is personal and experiential concept-using activity, more an ability than an impersonal or detached process of forming propositions (*ibid.*, 615, 618). To understand the changes in values, Murdoch's views on conceptual perception are worth examining.

4.2.1 Perception as Conceptual and Evaluative

For Murdoch concepts we use to describe the world do not derive their meaning only from their public use of language but also express the sensibility of the concepts to their users, derived from experience. Murdoch states that we learn concepts by "attending to contexts", develop our vocabulary through "close attention to objects" and can only understand others "if we can to some extent share their contexts" (Murdoch 2001, 42). Concepts are thus both deeply contextual, personal and world related (Panizza 2019, 7–8). Words are merely empty signs without relevant perceptual-imaginative contexts and experiences that ground these words into concepts really understandable for the subject.³⁹ Conversely, the concepts that

³⁹ Perhaps these contexts are not always perceptual-imaginative – theoretical physics or pure mathematics and other theoretical disciplines constitute other kinds of contexts in which their

are perceptually rooted become ways of seeing the world: “concepts are like eyes: we see through them, but what we see is not in them“ (Panizza 2019, 8).⁴⁰ Our grasping of the world beyond our immediate spatiotemporal situation works through imagination and understanding, which are and derived from our prior perceptual encounters with the world. The concepts we use and our perception are in a mutually formative relationship between each other (cf. Panizza 2019, 9–10). Also, perception, understanding and imagination are pervasively evaluative: when we perceive or imagine the world, evaluation is already operating. For Murdoch (1992, 314–315) “our deepest imaginings which structure the world in which ‘moral judgments’ occur are already evaluations. Perception itself is a mode of evaluation”.

Concepts can also deepen via accumulated experience, as the experience which is their context changes: Murdoch uses the perception of the color red as an example – surely a painter knows more deeply this concept than someone who knows it superficially (Panizza 2019, 12; Murdoch 2001, 29; Murdoch 1997, 323; cf. Jackson 1982, 1986). Thus, the accumulated experience is important for gaining deeper understanding about concepts. For Murdoch, consciousness and perception are not passive receivers of reality, but rather active “tools for interacting with reality to form knowledge”, not “mirroring” but “grasping” the world (Panizza 2019, 9).

4.2.2 Moral Concepts and Moral Change

Similarly, moral perception was for Murdoch inherently conceptual. Moral concepts are not *a priori* to experience, but are part of the perception, and derived from perception (Panizza 2019, 8). As Panizza interprets, Murdoch claims that we experience and non-inferentially perceive the thick moral concepts and moral properties of the world (ibid., 7). Evaluative moral concepts are an important and necessary part of the perception as a way to grasp the reality “out there”, and they are on the same continuum with other concepts (ibid., 8). Moral perceptions do not fundamentally differ from or depend on non-moral properties or configuration.

concepts are grounded. However, even these include some kind of context of practice which is perceptual-imaginative, for example the concrete action while writing formulas or using a calculator.

⁴⁰ Interesting question is whether we have perceptual concepts that cannot be translated to verbal and explicit concepts might not always be easy or feasible. For example, non-linguistic intelligent animals might have this kind of conceptual perception that includes evaluation, although lacking the skill to employ explicit verbal concepts. Does the perception have conceptual structure even if concepts cannot be verbalized?

Perception reveals a world “which is both moral and physical, and inextricably so.” (ibid., 13). For Murdoch, values and moral properties are “deep moral configurations of the world”, rather than “lines drawn round separable factual areas”, and accordingly for her there is no “facts ‘behind them’ for them to be erroneously defined in terms of” (Murdoch 1997, 95). The moral concepts we perceive (and perceive *with*) are “background moral attitudes”, ways to evaluate the situation in the seeing itself. Murdoch states that if a moral concept is withdrawn, we are not left with the same situation or the same facts. Thus, for Murdoch it was crucially important *how* a particular moral situation was perceived, and which concepts were used to describe the situation. Different moral concepts reflect different ways of perceiving the whole situation. In this account moral differences lie in what we see, not only what we see things as (Panizza 2019, 13).

One central point of Murdoch’s whole account of moral perception is the possibility of change of our conceptions towards more attunement with reality. As she writes, there is a radical difference in how the objectivity of our conceptions is conceived, whether it is defined by shared, scientific observation, or by the progression towards perfection by a person (Murdoch 1997, 320; Cooper 2019). We are not always accurately perceiving the situation we find ourselves in. Moral perceptions are fallible and can change as a result of reflection and re-looking (Murdoch 1997, 316). As products of the human minds and communities, concepts and moral concepts are not fixed but can be developed through both more attentive, accurate perception and reflection (Panizza 2019, 14). Moral concepts are, as Panizza notes “amenable to correction, clarification as well as distortion and avoidance”, and can be and are “refined, clarified and corrected ... by looking both at the world they are used to capture and at the people who use them” (Panizza 2019, 14).

To illustrate this dual change of moral perception and concepts, Murdoch (1997, 312–318) uses an example of a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. After a moment of introspection and just attention directed towards the daughter, initially perceived in unfavourable light, mother changes her view. The daughter first perceived as “juvenile” and “coarse” is after closer looking and re-examination experienced as “refreshingly simple” and “authentic”. As a result of looking again, the mother finds a new viewpoint, and thus starts to employ other concepts to express a new, more fitting conceptual phrasing of the situation. That not only action but also this kind of inner change affected by looking again was morally relevant is one central point Murdoch wanted to make (Panizza 2019, 2).

In the case of mother and daughter, the concepts undergo change. On the other hand, in the case of conceptual deepening mentioned above, the content of the concept

undergoes change. Using the word 'repentance' as another example, Murdoch says that this word means different things to an individual at different times in his life, and cannot be understood except in the context of a person's life. For Murdoch moral concepts cannot be understood completely just by adopting the use of the word in language: instead, they must be fleshed out by accumulated experience experienced by persons (Murdoch 1997, 317–323). Inner change we go through changes the meaning of concepts for us. This is one point how Murdoch is helpful to understand the later discussion of psychedelic change of values.

4.2.3 Unselfing and Moral Perception

Discussing these examples Murdoch claims that it is this kind of re-evaluation and examination, inner struggle in order to see lovingly and justly, that leads to increased attention towards the world. This increased attention in turn increases clarity of perception and the adaptation of new moral concepts and deepening of others. Our vision is transformed as we undergo a change in moral evaluation while striving for a more clear picture of the world. These kinds of changes in perception towards more accuracy and less error are inner transformations in the subject, as also Vervaeke has interpreted.⁴¹ Our internal, conceptual models began to more conform with the structure of reality. This kind of moral change is strongly related to the process of unselfing:

Our states of consciousness differ in quality, our fantasies and reveries are not trivial and unimportant, they are profoundly connected with our energies and our ability to choose and act. If quality of consciousness matters, then anything which alters our consciousness in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity and realism is to be connected with virtue. (Murdoch 2001, 84) [...] The self, the place where we live, is a place of illusion. Goodness is connected with the attempt to see the unself, to see and to respond to the real world in the light of a virtuous consciousness. [...] 'Good is a transcendent reality' means that virtue is the attempt to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is. (Murdoch 2001, 93)

One central reason moral perception and deliberation in overall might be enhanced by unselfing is because it increases both the amount and quality of the attention we have available for the world, and this makes us able to update our models of the world (Murdoch 1997, 332; compare Panizza 2019, 4). For Murdoch, loving and just attention directed towards the world in an effort to really look was at the heart of her conception of unselfing:

⁴¹ This interpretation by Vervaeke is mentioned in his online lecture series 'Awakening from the Meaning Crisis', episode 17, but not published in an article format.

“What counteracts the system [of egocentric fantasy] is attention to reality inspired by, consisting of, love.” (Murdoch 1997, 354). Loving attention to reality is a way to overcome both the egocentric attributions of salience by orienting away from ourselves, and our preconceptions, to enable the change and deepening of our (moral) concepts by more careful looking and more careful attending to the context. Interestingly Maslow (1980, 137–136) also uses term ‘being-love’ in a very similar manner as Murdoch uses the concept of loving attention, as a way of paying attention that does not try to mold the object of perception to one’s preconceptions nor to impose the preconceptions on the perceived or measure it against criteria of importance or relevance, but perceives it more as it is itself. Similarly Maslow thinks that perception might be more or less prone to ‘rubricizing’, that is, assimilate the perceived to the categories formed in the past (for example, is a tree one perceives is just another tree, or is it seen in its uniqueness) (cf. Maslow 1971, 61).

For Murdoch there is an intimate connection between perception of reality, goodness, virtue and unselfing. Although reaching towards the good or developing virtue consistently in all areas of life might be a practical impossibility (Murdoch 2001, 99), the kind of habits – both intrapsychic and behavioral – we built is morally important. As Panizza notes, for Murdoch our perception is not inert or contemplative but directly linked to action, motivation and reasons for actions (Panizza 2019, 14). According to Murdoch, the quality of our mind states and consciousness are crucially important for how our psychic energy is directed, and this in turn is crucial for how we will act: our attention and our thoughts affect what we hold significant and important. How we are accustomed to seeing the world continuously builds structures of value around us, and in effect beforehand dictates how we shall choose at the crucial moments when choosing needs to be done: the choice is in a sense already done by our vision, not by a freely-floating will (Murdoch 1997, 329–331; Ruokonen 2002, 212; Olsson 2018).

Viewed from this angle, the area of moral philosophy becomes very wide: “The area of morals, and ergo of moral philosophy, can . . . be seen . . . as covering *the whole of our mode of living and the quality of our relations with the world.*” (Murdoch 2001, 97, original emphasis). According to this view of moral philosophy, inner change in the seeing of the world such as the activity of the mother in the example are moral activity (Murdoch 1997, 314). Especially things that induce inner change in the direction of a less egocentric perspective and ways of seeing – in intertwined perceptions and conceptions by which we structure our world – are morally highly relevant. In this light the kinds of perspective shifts

occasioned by techniques of unselfing – art, contemplative practices, nature, peak-experiences, psychedelics et cetera – are morally central.

4.3 Unselfing and Perception of Values

The main claim of this chapter, that the process of unselfing is of help for perception of values, is elaborated in this section. If we can make a plausible argument for this point, the task of explaining the change of values as a result of psychedelic and other experiences of self-transcendence will be much easier. I will support this claim both by points derived from Murdoch and by observations made by Abraham Maslow.

Murdoch endorses the claim that the (moral) state of the perceiver affects how well moral perceiving is done. For Murdoch the moral state is about virtue which she closely connects with unselfishness and objectivity (Murdoch 2001, 84). Here I will focus on the claim that unselfing helps with perception of values by changing the evaluative centering of the moral agent.⁴² The decoupling of salience from our egocentric concerns allows redirecting attention to perceptual and conceptual features that might do two crucial things. First, unselfing might help us to perceive things as valuable in themselves and make us perceive inherent intrinsic value of the world and things, as the whole machinery of instrumental rationality revolving around the self is less in operation. Secondly, we might become better in evaluating and perceiving value from a larger perspective, and thus better perceive universal intrinsic values. I first elaborate how moral perception, especially our ability to perceive values are tied to our perspective and level of egocentricity.

4.3.1 Moral Versus Nonmoral Reason for Self-Transcendence

Firstlet's clarify one possible source of confusion. If we grant that overcoming egocentricity is possible and morally relevant, what does this imply for morality? Is overcoming our partial, egocentric perspective and instrumental values a) a moral imperative, b) morally desirable, or c) desirable for some other reason? I want to make a couple of points to avoid falling into a supererogatory and unrealistically moral perfectionist position.

First, some amount of egocentricity, instrumentality and partiality in our perspective might be even a requirement for morality, or at least an important aspect of it, as for example

⁴² Although other things than unselfing might also help, such as other things that increase attention to the world: the claim is not that *only* unselfing could foster moral perception. Also below I examine the option that unselfing makes perception more malleable or flexible, and that this helps with moral perception. It might be that also other reasons for this increased flexibility might be helpful, at least if combined with the right kind of attention.

Bernard Williams (1981, 1–19) has argued (Friedman 1991). I do not want to argue that we should be all the time in the perspective of ‘view from nowhere’, or some other state of utter self-transcendence (Nagel 1971; 1986). Neither is the position that we all should strive to abandon our instrumental pursuit altogether and become full-time contemplatives.⁴³ Also egocentricity is such a pervasive aspect of our life, that even if we would like to overcome it, it is unlikely that we even could overcome our partial perspectives completely (cf. Murdoch 2001, 99).

To respond to the question whether unselfing is a moral imperative, I think it is not. Overcoming egocentricity is not a moral requirement or desirable primarily for moral reasons. Egocentricity in itself is not a *moral* problem, in the narrow sense of the word, although it is morally relevant and is related to many moral problems (related cases might include for example narcissism, xenophobic conceptions, racism and collective action problems (see Panizza 2019, 14–15 or Ahlskog 2017, 365). For analytical clarity it is helpful to differentiate morally innocent forms of egocentric perspective from uninnocent forms. For moral conduct (in the narrow sense) the problem is posed by certain overt forms of egocentricity, namely egoistic tendencies, which cause misperception of situations and selfish action in a much stronger sense than innocent forms of egocentricity.

⁴³ Another possible worry is that might these kinds of experience and the cosmocentric perspective make the perspective too universal for conventional morality, perhaps turning the person into a morally disinterested mystic. In peak-experiences and mystical experiences paradoxical fusing, unification or transcendence of opposites or dualities, experiences of oneness and a sense of reconciliation of the evil are often experienced (for example, Maslow 1970, 63–64, 91–96). Murdoch, for example, stresses the importance of seeing other people in their particularity and uniqueness (Murdoch 1997, 353–354). Maslow (2011, 93–100) also acknowledges the dangers of being-cognition, and mentions the blurring of everyday values, too great tolerance, lessened sense of personal responsibility and willingness to act and over-esthetics as possible risks of peak-experiences. Also, as pointed out by Thomas Nagel (1971; 1986), instead of meaningfulness, too universal a viewpoint can lead to the perception of the world and existence as absurd. If everything is perceived as oneness, will the ethical motivation to fight for the rights of separate beings dissipate? The significance of ordinary morality might be at stake, if the reference point is so wide that human lives do not seem to really matter anymore. The will to solve practical moral problems often requires some kind of presupposition of separateness and perception that does not see the world as perfect or final. Egocentric and instrumental perspective might actually support the ability for moral conduct and reasoning.

To respond to these worries, we might first respond that it is unlikely that we could transcend egocentricity totally, even if we wanted. Secondly, Vervaeke in a speech has pointed out that universal point of view does not have to be juxtaposed against particular perspective. His point is that the particular and universal perspective can become interpenetrating, that this is what has been the goal sought out in wisdom traditions. This interpenetration would cancel out the problem posed by absurdity. The particular perspective, it seems, has also to be retained and included: if this is lost in the process of transformative experiences, the conventional morality might indeed be at risk. (Alliteration of Vervaeke’s speech can be found here: <https://modernstoicism.com/the-view-from-above-a-transformation-of-perspectival-and-participatory-knowing-by-john-vervaeke/>. Accessed 18.4.2020)

Also, even if altruistic tendencies would be enhanced by unselfing (as I believe they might), it would be supererogatory to require self-transcendence for moral reasons. Further, this might not be the most appropriate motivation for self-transcendence. As Wolf (1982) argues, it might not even be desirable that we would all become ‘moral saints’ who have as their sole motivation the welfare of other people. As she points out, there are other goods than moral goods that have to be considered in our understanding of good life, which moral sainthood might exclude. To concur with this point, the conception of good life and virtues pursued here that underlies the concept of unselfing, should not be understood as overtly concerned with moral goals as they are usually conceived (becoming an altruist, serving others), even if the project of becoming a moral saint could be contributed by the process of unselfing. Unselfing does not imply making moral values a central goal, nor are benefits of unselfing limited to *moral* virtues or *moral* values in a narrow sense, even if unselfing is morally relevant as Murdoch argued. Self-transcendence and unselfing are, however, more desirable projects when the whole of our life is taken into consideration, including its nonmoral dimensions. The strive towards impartiality and cosmic centering can give us proleptic insights and glimpses about our place and possibilities in the world, help us perceive the world more accurately, and help with living a flourishing life (although relatively non-egocentric focus might be optimal for both morality and eudaimonia) (for the concept of proleptic rationality, see Callard 2018). It is better to dedicate oneself to values than to narrow moral perfection or altruism, both because narrow moral perfectionism excludes many non-moral virtues (Wolf 1982), and because orientation to and by values seem to be a wholesome way to live a flourishing life (cf. for example Maslow 1971; Frankl 1984). Thus, here I defend a position that at least to some extent the aspiration to overcome partial perspectives and move towards objectivity by unselfing is both possible and desirable to some extent, but more for eudaimonic than for moral reasons. It is central to this argument that the egocentric perspective might sometimes become too constraining and inflexible, thus creating framings and ways of seeing which disconnect us from the reality and from the values, in which much of our perfection and flourishing lies.

4.3.2 Egocentric Framings and Diminution of Value Perception

Our egoic centering can hinder moral perception of values, both by the associated attribution of salience and by the egocentric conceptions or framings (which are, in effect, top-down constructs governing the salience). The claim is that egocentric perspective constrains attention and limits how situations are framed in one’s experience. This is morally relevant

both in the Murdochian wider sense but sometimes also in a more ordinary sense, as egoic centering underlies many undesired forms of unjust and egoistic framings. However, in the following the focus is on perception of values, not in cases which are moral in a narrower sense

In egocentric states our psychic energy and attention is available for the world around us in a highly selective manner: especially those features are seen as salient which are beneficial or harmful 1) to the self or, 2) to the in-group. Egocentric perspective thus makes those things more salient that are instrumentally valuable for us – which arguably is a deep source of value-confusion. Egocentric perspective upholds what Erich Fromm (1976) called ‘the having mode’: an existential attitude of instrumentality towards the worlds, contrasted with ‘the being mode’, a notion close to what I termed the cosmocentric perspective in the previous chapter.

Often in an egocentric state we are motivated by certain perceived deficiencies, and the wider values (such as beauty, truth and justice, termed as B-values by Maslow) evade us, because our own, or our in-group’s advantage is all that is deemed relevant. The perception of values becomes highly egocentric, as the values perceived revolve around the self. The intrinsic values are thus more easily overlooked or not perceived. To take a practical example, while walking in a forest I own, I might be thinking about the monetary, instrumental value this forest has for me. The intrinsic beauty or the inherent value of the forest passes by, as the attention centered on calculating the worth of the forest. Or to take example about the values of justice and truth, we could think about situations in a court, perhaps about a minor, petty disagreement that has gained unfortunate momentum. I might be very entangled in winning the court case and thus involved in an argument without consideration for justice or truth. In this case egocentric focus on the outcome and benefit gained from winning the case is blocking me from glimpsing these universal and intrinsic values or aligning with them.

Similarly, our conceptions, egocentric salience and perception of values are strongly coupled together, as Murdoch points out. Egocentric attention upholds egocentric conceptions and associated perception of value, but also our egocentric conceptions in turn upholds egocentric salience and attention. When governed by egocentric salience, we are paying less attention to reality as it is and are more absorbed to self-centered narratives and paying attention to features that are salient in light of these narratives. Precisely these narratives Murdoch called fantasy – false but consoling and comforting images of reality that make us center on ourselves and not to pay loving attention. Egocentric conceptions,

fantasies or illusions, are often designed to serve our psychic needs, as Denham (2001, 623–624) points out. Conceptions about the self are tied as an important part to these narratives. For example, when walking in the forest I might frame and see the forest in terms of “source of my income” and “my resource” and imagining myself as a “proud owner of a forest” whose forestry business will grow to magnificent degrees. According to these framings and narratives I might see the forest as “boring, homogenous, bland”, instead of perceiving it as “intriguing, full of details, magnificent” and as “home of countless creatures”.

Seeing beyond these partial and instrumental perspectives of value would require a different kind of view and cognitive reframing by the use of loving attention. I agree with Murdoch as interpreted by Panizza that the moral work required for the conceptual improvement includes both reduction of self-created impediments, like the egocentric fantasies and wants, and “the active reaching out to reality in order to refine one’s concepts”, in an attempt to be “maximally receptive to the reality” that shapes these concepts (Panizza 2019, 15). These conditions are fulfilled by unselfing, which I shall focus on next.

4.3.3 Widening Circles: Unselfing and Perception of Intrinsic Values

To sum up, there are various mutually reinforcing dynamics in the process of unselfing. While evaluative egocentricity is reduced, a) the amount of attention we have available for the world increases and the quality of this attention changes, b) we move to a more reality-bound and universal perspective, and c) our (moral) concepts change as they become more malleable and more tuned to the new perceptions that increased attention can yield. The causal relationships between these aspects are mutual and can chain in different ways.⁴⁴ Together these factors involved in the process of unselfing can foster moral perception by attuning our moral conceptions with reality. From the point of view of values, these various factors involved in unselfing can help with the perception of intrinsic values. By reducing egocentric instrumental evaluation and by widening our evaluative context, unselfing directs our attention to the intrinsic values of this reality and to the inherent value of things.

⁴⁴ For example, when the egocentric salience is disrupted, this will increase our attention to the world, to those features that are ordinarily not so important. This enables the perception of new moral configurations. On the other hand, if certain conceptual configurations are questioned or bracketed, this also might increase the attention to the world— and this might occur in various ways, for example by reflection or by suggestion from somebody else, or by techniques which disrupt the top-down machinery of our cognition such as meditation or psychedelics. Similarly, if our attention to the world is increased (for example by contemplative exercise or by getting really curious about something), this in itself reduces the egoic centering.

Of course, in practical life we can evaluate objects and actions in a detached manner on an abstract level: the fact we have abstract cognition and ideals of impartiality can be seen as factors that foster unselfing. But in a more comprehensive perspectival and perceptual manner the egocentric salience is a factor strongly limiting our interactions with the world. The egocentric attribution of salience seems to be a construction that attaches the evaluation of the good into the perspective of a particular, limited whole of evaluations and deficiencies centered around the self. Thus, from the viewpoint of values the egoic centering could be conceived as a perspectival filter that limits the perception of salience and relevance, limiting the perception of values.

Unselfing enables us to assess what is relevant from a wider perspective. As we can argue based on Murdoch, unselfing can cause a shift to a wider and more universal perspective or evaluative context. On top of revealing intrinsic values, unselfing can also be conceived as a process that enables the refining of our perceptions as it acquaints us with wider perceptual and perspectival context in which our moral perceptions and concepts can deepen and change. When we are not so entangled in our machinery of self-centered fantasy and self-importance, we are more able to perceive what is good, not only for our own interests, but in a larger context. When the perspective widens to spatial and temporal wholes that transcend the self, our evaluations clearly change. One way to phrase the phenomenon is to say that via unselfing and changes in attention the context of perception changes: the *gestalt* of perception alters, as the self is not in the same way foregrounded as when we are in a state of high egocentricity. That which was in the background of the old salience landscape can become important. The temporal widening of the perspective is reflected in how Murdoch intimately connects transiency, contingency and death with unselfing and to the Good:

Goodness is connected with the acceptance of real death and real chance and real transience and only against the background of this acceptance, which is psychologically so difficult, can we understand the full extent of what virtue is like. The acceptance of death is an acceptance of our own nothingness which is an automatic spur to our concern with what is not ourselves. (Murdoch 1997, 103)

This widening of evaluative context is morally important. Although the main point I am making here is not about enhancing moral behavior, it should be noted that this is also likely

one result of unselfing.⁴⁵ The ability to simulate and see the good from perspectives wider than oneself is a crucial aspect of moral development (cf. Macy 1991, 194–195). Our circle of empathy and concerns widens if we are not evaluating the world from the perspective of self and the in-group. Unselfing can widen our concern step by step not only on an abstract or theoretical level, but also practically and concerning what is meant by good: congruence is found with larger and larger wholes.⁴⁶

Our capacity for imagination is also concerned here. Imagination in the sense Murdoch used the term is closely related to this grasping and conceptualizing activity, and can be understood as the personal and evaluative component of perception and understanding (Panizza 2019; Murdoch 1992, 308–347). Imagination in Murdoch's sense is the ability “to see beyond what is given directly to one's subjective and self-centered point of view”, as Denham (2001, 623) puts it. For example, contemplating the vastness of the cosmos in a state of awe, or directing compassion to an unknown person on the other side of the earth might count as examples where the perspective is via imagination stretched to cover wider temporal and spatial wholes. Unselfing thus opens our capacities to imagine and this possibility to engage the world in an active fashion that is important for perception of values and for moral action.

4.3.4 Peak-experiences and Being-Values

Psychologist Abraham Maslow's work can be used for supporting Murdoch's claims and to connect the moral perception and unselfing to themes of altered states of consciousness. Furthermore, certain aspects of work of these thinkers indicate a remarkable convergence of very different intellectual tradition. With a strong philosophical leaning, Maslow argues for

⁴⁵ There is also empirical evidence related to meditation and to psychedelic drugs that support the claim that diminished sense of self might lead to prosocial behavior (see Ahlskog 2017, 367–368; Yaden et al. 2017). Ahlskog (2017) has also argued that decreasing self-interest and enhancing cognitive capacity are potent sources of moral enhancement, as this might leave more cognitive resources for our moral sentiments directed towards others. The increased attention and the widened evaluative perspective and other factors that result from decreased egocentric perspective surveyed here might be one reason why the diminished sense of self might be important for morality.

⁴⁶ Already ancient stoics used this metaphor of moral progression (Ramelli 2009, lvi), and this shift to an universal perspective underlies modern ethical theories such as utilitarianism and deontology. Perhaps the Good is maximally approximated when as large as possible a reference point for what is good is taken. This kind of aligning to the largest possible extent is reminding for example the stoic ideal about aligning to the will of the universe, Tao in taoism, or theistic notions about aligning with god (which, interpreted from panteistic viewpoint, might be the totality of being). Peak-experiences can also be framed in this way as experiences where the Good is simulated from a very wide perspective.

a comprehensive view of human nature. Especially interesting for us is Maslow's work on what he called Being-values, which according to him are especially perceivable or cognizable under Being-cognition, in peak-experiences and for people who have a relatively enduring less egocentric perspective (Maslow 1971, 241–255). Following Maslow, I argue that PE's are prime examples of the perspectival shifts which can enhance our ability to perceive values. It seems that in the states of self-transcendence such as PE's egocentric evaluative bias is removed especially strongly, and the perception of intrinsic or universal values (B-values) is fostered to a great degree.

Maslow claims that peak-experiences bring about a shift in perception and cognition from deficit-cognition to being-cognition (Maslow 1970, 91–96; 1980, 241–255). This change in the centering point from which the world is looked at, reveals so-called 'being-values'. Maslow claims, based on his empirical inquiries to the subject, that during peak-experience people repeatedly perceive the world as good, beautiful and true. In overall he listed fourteen characteristics – most of which are values in conventional moral parlance – which describe both how the world is seen during peak-experiences, and which are irreducible intrinsic values of reality as it is perceived in these states (Maslow 1970, 92–94). The fourteen B-values Maslow specifies are aspects of one undivided reality that are in mutually supporting relation to each other. He defines these Being-values as the ways in which the world reveals itself when it is seen from a cosmocentric viewpoint that does not evaluate the world from the viewpoint of ego (*ibid.*, 96). These values are related to the way we see the world when we are freed from the 'deficit cognition', that is, the perspective of perceived deficit generated by our needs, wants and instrumental attitudes. The cosmocentric centering of peak-experiences can be seen as relinquishing of our egocentric attributions of importance. In peak-experiences and similar states the world is seen from a non-instrumental point of view, as being-in-itself, without an ulterior reason. Maslow thus claims for a convergence of the centering of our perspective and the perception of values. A similar idea can be found from his contemporary Erich Fromm (1976) who made a similar distinction between instrumentally rational 'having mode' and non-instrumental 'being mode'.

As pointed out earlier, Maslow (1971, 242–243) claimed that there are two kinds of peak-experiences: those in which perspective narrows down to an exclusive focus of the perceived, and those of 'cosmic consciousness', a perspectival widening. The ordinarily operating egocentric evaluation is disrupted in both of these cases. Although Maslow did not make this distinction, we might take these experiences as states that respectively maximally foster the perception of inherent intrinsic value of things and intrinsic universal values. In

case of narrowing of the focus to a single object in a self-forgetful fashion we might better perceive the inherent value of this object and intrinsic values as they are instantiated in this particular object. On the other hand, in the states of 'cosmic consciousness' and similar widened perspectives the intrinsic values are perceived from a universal perspective and *gestalts* as the whole world.

Paradoxically, B-values at the same time describe reality and imply a normative aspect, as also giving direction and telling what is important and should be pursued. In states of this kind of cognition, Maslow claimed, perceptions about certain values and facts are intermingled, not separable: in the same way as Murdoch, Maslow denies the strict separation of facts and values. Instead, he thinks that facts have a certain kind of 'oughtiness' – value-component, we could say – as a clear perception of facts is often exactly what is needed and enough for finding the right course of action (Maslow 1971, 102–120). He uses the term 'fusion words' to refer to the concepts that at the same time have a factual and value-dimension: a notion in this respect similar to 'thick moral concepts' to which Murdoch refers (Maslow 1971, 26–27).

Further Maslow claimed that these being values – spearheaded by truth, goodness and beauty – are at least in the context of human race supracultural absolutes of a kind and have a certain kind of biological rootedness (1970, 64–65). Being-values, according to Maslow, are found within the deep self of humans, but they are also patterns structuring the reality as it is perceived during being-cognition (Maslow 1971, 133).

Self-Actualization and the Introjection of B-Values

Maslow argues that these being-values are especially perceptible to self-actualizers, that is, individuals who have satisfied the lower deficit needs, attained ideal levels of wellbeing and are using their human capacities to the full (Maslow 1971, 102–120). Maslow claimed that these self-actualizers are better perceivers in general. They can more readily enter the Being-cognition, which is the purest and most effective kind of perception of reality, not contaminated by the wishes, fears and needs of the individual (Maslow 1971, 160). For Maslow, the perception and introjection of these intrinsic values are essential to his understanding of the higher potentials of human development. Maslow develops a theory about metamotivation that means motivation that stems from these values: this kind of motivation is precisely what propels self-actualizing individuals when their lower or basic needs are met and fulfilled (Maslow 1971, 289–328). He claims that this does not automatically follow, since there are people who have their lower needs satisfied but can

still suffer from a disconnection from these values called metapathology, a notion similar to the noogenic neurosis of Frankl (1984). Further, Maslow (1971, 296) sees that internalizing or introjecting these values is one way to self-transcendence, to unite oneself to reality and to wholes transcending the ego – not only temporarily but also in long-term, if the B-values become a central source of motivation for the individual.

Maslow thus sees a intrinsic reciprocal relation between individual self-actualizing, that is, moving towards greater good and these states of self-transcendence⁴⁷. The Good in the sense of Maslowian Being-values can be seen as a perception that opens as we move along the developmental continuum, a state of high connection to the world. Thus, the good as the human flourishing in self-actualizing would converge with the perception of the good as a being-value. People whose well-being surpassed the average, the self-actualizers, and are thus, we could say, more in tune with the good in their lives, are also more prone to perceiving the whole world as good (cf. Maslow 1971, 297-305; 1970, 92–94).

This lines up nicely with Murdoch's thoughts. Thus, we could say that the being-cognition would be a state resulting from unselfing that enhances perception in general and moral perception in particular, allowing the perception of being-values. Peak-experiences could then be framed as states where we direct lots of loving, non-egocentric attention to the world, and are able to perceive intrinsic values more accurately. B-values would thus be the widest possible and most encompassing perceived patterns of value in the world, related to cosmocentric perspective. They are a way to perceive the world in a highly unitative manner. The perception of these kinds of general or intrinsic values such as beauty, justice or truth inherently transcend the self and connect us to wider wholes. Thus, the perception of being values is in itself a form of perspectival widening, and it can also result from a perspectival widening from peak-experiences and from other forms of self-transcendence.

4.3.5 Unselfing as Inverse Cognitive Penetration

Väyrynen (2017) claims that many varieties of moral perception rely on cognitive penetration, that is, the idea that moral perceptions are conjured or projected by various

⁴⁷ The reciprocal connection between these states and spiritual or moral progression has been a common theme in a variety of contemplative and mystical traditions. As observed in the field of psychology since the writings of William James (1902), sometimes these kinds of experiences can reorient the value system and worldview of the person in radical ways, leading sometimes even to great moral changes. In world literature the cases of Paul in christian tradition and the case of Bodhidharma in buddhist traditions are archetypal cases of these kind of abrupt transformation experiences: in both cases a highly immoral person experiences a transformation in character and is converted into an adherent and advocate of a world religion through a spiritual experience.

moral background assumptions, emotions et cetera. However, he does not consider that certain forms of cognitive penetration might also be hindering moral perception in one way or another. Based on the argument I have built, one could argue that certain values, such as intrinsic values, are obscured because of cognitive penetration by some of our moral or nonmoral background beliefs and cognitions, such as those related to self and egocentric narratives and desires, or certain culturally learned conceptions. According to this view the perception of values might be enhanced by unselfing because some factors that hinder the perception are undone in certain experiential states such as peak-experiences, and to lesser extent in lesser forms of unselfing. Unselfing would, in this view, cause a kind of **inverse cognitive penetration** or unfabrication of perception (cf. Burbea 2014).

For example, the salience tied to our egocentric perspective – or the self as a whole, if we adapt the constructionist stance discussed in 3.1 – can be understood as a form of cognitive penetration. In this view egocentric cognitive penetration makes us not notice certain otherwise relevant features or makes us less sensitive to the overall context of our experience, as the attention is constricted to certain features salient from the perspective of egocentric attributions of values such as egocentric narratives. In this case unselfing would decrease cognitive penetration of experience by egoistic narratives and egoistic salience, remove layers of self-referentiality which biases and constricts the perception.⁴⁸ Thus in this view the egocentric and egocentrically instrumental evaluations would be the result of cognitive penetration, and unselfing a process that lessens this cognitive penetration, and subsequently allows for better perception of intrinsic values.

Especially for peak-experiences and similar states the view that they are forms of inverse cognitive penetration is very attractive. Maslow clearly can be interpreted this way, as he connects not only peak-experiences but also the process of self-actualization to detachment of the viewpoint from human concerns, implying that systems of culturally and personally conditioned salience quiet down (Maslow 1970, 61). B-values in peak-experiences might be a notable exception to the schema Väyrynen (2017, 6, 20) is proposing, as they challenge the common assumption he posits as a common premise – that moral perception would always be mediated by cognitive penetration. If we allow that

⁴⁸ This notion could be backed up with neuroscientific and cognitive scientific theories of the self, as bundle of top-down models instantiated by certain neural networks, see section 3.2.5 (cf. Letheby & Gerrans 2017; Carhart-Harris & Friston 2019). Also a congruence should be noted to various spiritual-philosophical traditions such as buddhism where seeing through the illusory belief associated with the self is intimately connected with concepts of awakening (Albahari 2006), or with middle platonism where removing the obstacles of seeing the true nature of self and the world were important part of spiritual-moral progression (Hadot 2004, 197–198)

certain intrinsic values are moral properties, it does not seem that in all cases the ability to perceptually represent moral properties is a result of training or background moral beliefs, or even that the overall capacity to represent moral properties would be wholly acquired, as Väyrynen supposes. This clearly is the implication, if intrinsic values such as the B-values are revealed rather than projected as objects of perception during PE's. In this case background moral beliefs and training would be less in operation during these experiences. Thus, if we accept Maslow's claim that B-values would be biologically rooted supracultural human universals, the account Väyrynen is proposing should be widened to allow the option that all moral representations are not culturally acquired. Thus we would end up with a dual model where the egocentric salience, culturally adapted background moral beliefs and other factors such as affects would mold moral perceptions via cognitive penetration, but some moral perceptions might come precisely from undoing the cognitive penetration laid by egocentric salience, culture and prior learning.⁴⁹

In the option that moral perception could work sometimes without CP (or via quite immediate forms of cognitive penetration, see below) suppose that the epistemic work done by PE's and similar states is also real. If we follow this line of thinking, peak-experiences and similar states evade the problem Väyrynen (2017, 25) poses as counter argument for moral epistemology in theories of moral perception. His point is that MP cannot be a source of moral knowledge, or cannot provide epistemically independent source of justification for moral beliefs, since if CP by background moral beliefs or emotions is granted, then moral perception is not an independent source of knowledge, but would hinge on the epistemic status of complex array of background factors that influence cognitive penetration. The point Väyrynen is making is that we should abandon strong forms of moral perception altogether as an explanation of our moral experience. But if MP is granted, and if in peak-experiences cognitive penetration is partly bracketed, then they might be a source of moral knowledge and justification through MP in a manner that many other forms of (strong) MP more reliant on CP by background assumptions cannot reach.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Perhaps combined with a complex enough cognitive system if we do not want to allow that for example animals and babies perceive B-values, or what Ken Wilber (2000, 211) calls pre-/trans-fallacy. Perception of B-values might require both acculturations and development of complex conceptual cognition, and the transcendence of this acculturation.

⁵⁰ If these states also to some extent bracket the old assumptions in general, and disrupt old cognitive framing, this might further increase the epistemic values of perceptual experience in these states. Maslow thought that they to some extent disrupted old framings (Maslow 1971, 160). Also there is evidence related to psychedelics that they do this, and thus might open one to construct new perceptual framings (Carhart-Harris & Friston 2019).

4.4 Metaethical Considerations

Finally, I want to discuss the possible meta-ethical interpretations we can take regarding the perception of values, especially of B-values of Maslow. There is room for various interpretations about the situation when the deconstruction of egocentric salience has happened, and we perceive values in a different way than before (for example, the B-values of Maslow). Are the B-values there, as it were, already waiting to be seen when some barriers are removed? Not everybody would agree that they are, nor that they are part of reality or human biology. If not, are the perceived values rather the result of other processes of cognitive penetration? I will lay out some possible interpretative options that are dealt in subsequent sections: value realism with veridical perception of values, value realism without veridical perception of values, value pluralism, and finally subjectivist or nihilist positions.

4.4.1 Value Realism with Veridical Perception of Values

The moral realist position sketched on Murdoch and Maslow is that unselfing would reveal real, at least intersubjectively existing values as a result of undoing certain obstacles of perception associated with egocentric perspective. This account can be interpreted in at least two ways. 1) A strong form of moral perception without CP is one option: this would be a direct realist take on the issue. In this case B-values would be perceived because the biasing egocentric salience has lessened, without mediation of cognitive penetration. 2) If the values are perceptually present because of cognitive penetration, but still epistemically somehow immediately grasped as they are perceived we might adopt a slightly different variety of value realist. Perhaps changes in perceived value configurations occur because some other factors than egocentric narratives and self-conceptions cognitively penetrate the perception. In this case values are there in the reality as real patterns to be somehow grasped, and they are projected into the experience via CP. In this view, CP would allow them to become present in our phenomenal experience. Murdoch's view could be interpreted like this: all perception, including moral perception would be mediated by cognitive penetration, as the perception is conceptual (Panizza 2019). The re-looking would lead to a reciprocal cascade of changes in our perception and in cognitive constructs which penetrate our experience, as more of the reality is revealed as a result of this looking. Gaining knowledge about a piece of art by studying it carefully could be an apt metaphor: perhaps we are making sense of the whole world in a quite similar way, as trying to look better and better and our whole perceptual-conceptual experience is the current output of

this process. A similarity can be drawn to predictive processing theories popular in cognitive science, as I elaborated in footnote 37 (Clark 2016; Hohwy 2013). However, this reciprocal change of concepts and perception is a much weaker form of cognitive penetration than one-way penetration by culturally adopted background moral beliefs. Also, the option Väyrynen (2017) proposes as a general alternative for MP might be a third alternative: that values are immediately grasped but this grasping does not happen in the perception *per se*.

4.4.2 Value Realism without Veridical Perception of Values

These options so far have relied on both a) value realism, and b) that the perception about values in peak-experiences and in similar states are veridical. Both of these assumptions can be questioned. Perhaps instead of direct perception some other background beliefs – such as pre-adopted, cultural conceptions about these intrinsic values – activate in PE's, and this is the explanation for perception of B-values. The issue bears notable similarities to debates whether mystical experiences are culturally constructed or not (cf. Katz 1978).

If we do not think that the perception in PE's and similar states is veridical in respect to values, but still retain value realism, we could say that values are real but moral perception is (either in general or in the case of PE's and similar states) is epistemically untrustworthy. According to this third value realist position values are real, but they cannot be perceived, and peak-experiences highly increase cognitive penetrability, and make us project values into perception based on background moral beliefs. These background moral beliefs which are the root of cognitive penetration might be correct or false as Väyrynen (2017, 25) points out, and based on our immediate perception we cannot judge whether they are true or false.

However, it is plausible that those parts of cognition that are related to egocentric perspective are bracketed in PE's and other forms of unselfing and thus the overall phenomenal experience is more sensitive to the whole context facing us. Even if we remain agnostic about B-values and moral perception, it is harder to contest that the instrumental attitudes would be in a sense unfabricated in the process of unselfing, and that this could bring changes in our valuations. Perhaps B-values and intrinsic values could be defined negatively as those valuations which remain when instrumental egocentric valuations decrease.

From another angle, in this case the value of these B-values might be retained, if they are cognitively penetrated by some aspects of our cognition or psyche which are veridical, and are doing a better job of getting a grip on reality than egocentric models – for

example, perhaps values have been correctly grasped by correct intellectual deliberation prior to these experiences, and this is the source of cognitive penetration.

In any case peak-experiences (and other experiences of self-transcendence such as psychedelic experiences) might have pragmatic value as they might foster processes of self-actualization Maslow describes. Thus they might help us with living a flourishing life, even if values perceived are not veridical. The pragmatic benefits of psychedelic moral perception will be further elaborated in the next chapter.

4.4.3 Value Pluralist or Constructivist Moral Perception

Similarly, the premise of value realism of Murdoch and Maslow might be contested. It might seem that many purported moral benefits of self-transcendence, also in the case of psychedelics explored in the next chapter, especially the perception of values and being values rests on the assumptions that the values are to some extent real, that there are values to be perceived to begin with. Although the meta-ethical position explored above has been mostly that of value realism, the claim that unselfing fosters moral perception can be accommodated to other meta-ethical frameworks as well, albeit the epistemic value of the moral perception becomes a bit weaker.

One position which contests value realism but can accommodate the possibility of (non-veridical) moral perception is value pluralism. In this approach values would not come from reality, as there would not be universal real values to be perceived, but from cultural background assumptions. These background assumptions would then be projected on phenomenal experience via CP or some similar mechanism. In this case non-veridical perception of values would occur, or perhaps veridical perception in the context of a certain value system. One might be able to overcome for example egocentric or idiosyncratic biases that form a barrier for glimpsing the values of the surrounding culture, or to overcome the value-conceptions instantiated by wider culture to adapt and perceive values espoused by another belief system (for example, taking psychedelics might enable the perception of values associated with psychedelic counterculture or certain spiritual circles).

In this case we could also defend the value of unselfing and of self-transcendence by pointing out that even if the premise about value realism would not be accepted, the detachment from egocentric perspective and the experiential identification to larger wholes transcending the self could be useful in the ability to extend one's notion of good or ethical concern beyond one's own self, which could, for example affect our reasoning processes. Even without veridical perception of values it is a reasonable claim that the decrease of

egocentricity would lead to overcoming partial and biased perspectives and open us to alternative and wider perspectives. This might satisfy for example somebody holding a similar view to Hare (1952) or Williams (1985), who see values as constructs but still think that the universal perspective is important for morality. The changes in values induced by self-transcendence can thus be seen as justified and understandable, even beneficial and epistemic processes even without this premise of direct and veridical perception of values, and without value realism. Even in this case the cosmocentric perspective and Being-values could be seen as a pragmatically useful construction, an ‘*as if*’ postulated by moral thinking. Also, the pragmatic benefits mentioned in the previous section might be retained: the understanding about the values might increase, and unselfing could connect us to values we have in a stronger way than is ordinarily possible.

However, the change of values can also pose a problem to the view according to which values are culturally constructed: in this framework it is difficult to explain the perception of values that one’s culture or one’s prior beliefs do not support. Some cases of this kind are documented in relation to psychedelics, as will be surveyed in the next chapter. Also, if Maslow’s claim that the B-values do not depend on the culture holds, this fact would be difficult to explain in a pluralistic framework.

4.4.4 Value Nihilist or Subjectivist Positions

The most pessimistic take on being-values or the changed moral concepts would be that their perception is some form of wishful thinking. From a moral nihilistic or subjectivist viewpoint apparent perception of values would be projection of subjective emotion or appraisal, or culturally shared values that do not have any philosophically robust ground (for example Sjöstedt-Hughed (2015) influenced by Nietzsche could hold a view like this). We could reply, if the critic still accepts that there is some objective epistemic truth, that even if we have no certainty that we are moving to any really valuable direction, openness to alternative conceptions has epistemic worth in any case, as Deutch (2011, 235) has pointed out. If self-transcendence makes us less sure about our certainties about values and opens us to new conceptions, it might thus reduce the risk that we endorse a position that is patently false and dangerous, and make us open to alternatives that might be closer to truth or pragmatically more useful. We could make a more modest claim that the increased attention to the world and reduced egocentricity makes just the re-observation and re-evaluation of one’s subjective values more likely, whether values have any external

grounding. Similarly, the pragmatic benefits would hold even if perceived values are illusory: perhaps they still can help us to live a flourishing life than egocentric values.

To sum up, the interpretative framework provided here for understanding the phenomena of unselfing does not yet settle the metaethical questions involved. There are many alternatives with different commitments in relation to views about perception, metaphysics, values et cetera that are possible explanations for the change of values as the result of peak- and psychedelic experiences. The work to explicate and contrast other contesting views is left for later work. Of course, the argument presented here would be most convincing if values are part of intersubjective reality in such a way that they can be perceived or be part of overall phenomenal experience. Murdoch (1997, 360-361) herself is against pragmatic definitions of moral perception. Maslow (1971, 145) as well stresses that the perception of values should be factual, not based on wishful thinking. The relevance of peak-experiences and psychedelic experiences for moral perception is greatest if the intrinsic values are real and can be perceived. Thus, I will endorse value realism as a lightly held working hypothesis in the next chapter, without strong commitment to it.

5 Psychedelic Unselfing and Moral Perception

The role of psychedelics in reducing our habitual and egocentric ways of perceiving has been anecdotally reported since the famous observations of Huxley's (1954) *The Doors of Perception*, and recently they have been scrutinized both scientifically and philosophically (Letheby & Gerrans 2017; Millière 2017; Millière et al. 2018; Carhart-Harris; Nour et al. 2016; Nour et al. 2018). The claim that psychedelics "expand consciousness" was a staple claim of popular *mythos* in the 1960's. The curious ability of self-transcendent experiences to cause radical changes in orientation, behavior and values was discussed already by William James (1902) in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, and recently less radical but more consistent changes in valuations as a result of psychedelic experiences have been observed (Yaden et al. 2017; Lerner and Lyvers 2006; Nour et al. 2017; Studerus et al. 2011; Forstmann & Sagioglou 2017). In this chapter I will offer one grounded and moderate explanation to understand these claims and changes by utilizing the framework of unselfing and perception of values developed in two previous chapters. This account works simultaneously as a novel argument for supporting the claim that psychedelics can function as tools of moral neuroenhancement (see chapter 2 section 4).

I argue that psychedelics produce experiences of unselfing, and can thus operate as a tool for changing perspective by weakening the egocentric attributions of salience in a fashion that fosters moral perception.⁵¹ Based on the framework developed in chapters 2 and 3, we could predict that in some psychedelic experiences we find 1) the use of attention in such a way that overcomes biases built by egocentric and instrumental perspectives and conceptions, 2) increased attention and imagination directed towards reality. Similarly, based on discussion of chapter 4, we have reason to expect that these psychedelic experiences where unselfing takes place would 3) widen our evaluative context and 4) enhance the perception of values, especially the perception of intrinsic values (such as Being-values of Maslow). In the two following sections I discuss psychedelic experiences that cash out these predictions. I suggest that these dynamics might explain the observed changes in values after psychedelic experiences, both the recognition of one's deep valuations in a sense forgotten in daily life or during mental distress, and the change of values to novel directions.

Further the change of values might be strengthened by *sui generis* properties of psychedelic experiences that do not directly follow from unselfing. According to research psychedelic experiences can facilitate the intertwinement of abstract thinking and perception, emotions and motivation (and also boost these perceptual and affective capacities), weaken the power of prior conceptions and beliefs over the experience, and foster imagination (in the conventional sense) (Winkelman 2001, 2017; Letheby 2019, 11; Carhart-Harris & Friston 2019). These factors might contribute to their potential use as tools for moral enhancement. In this chapter I first lay out some support for their unselfing capacity, and then move on to the themes of moral perception. In the last subsection I will discuss philosophical issues concerning their epistemic dimensions and possible counter arguments.

⁵¹The conclusion of the argument of this chapter also follows deductively from what has been said: P1: Psychedelics have a capacity for unselfing. Psychedelics produce mystical experiences, PEs and DIED's (chapter 2 and 5.1). These experiences of self-transcendence reduce egoic centering, i.e. unself (chapter 3). There is other independent evidence that psychedelics unself (chapter 5.1). P2: Unselfing fosters the perception of values (chapter 4). Unselfing fosters shifting of attention away from autobiographical thoughts and other egocentric attributions of salience to the world. The reduction of egoic centering enables paying more loving attention to reality (chapter 3 and 4). Loving attention to reality enables us to overcome our preconceptions and biased narratives, widens our evaluative context, and thus lets us perceive the moral reality and intrinsic values more accurately (chapter 4). Conclusion: Psychedelics foster the moral perception, especially of intrinsic values.

5.1 Psychedelic Unselfing

It should be noted that unselfing and the perspectival changes discussed in this chapter are not a feature of every psychedelic experience. Without proper context and intentions psychedelic substances do not necessarily induce these effects. Some psychedelic experiences and elements of these experiences sometimes really and sometimes apparently go against these unselfing changes: the variety of potential experiences is wide.⁵²

Similarly, as their long-term effect psychedelics sometimes transform lives (Shanon 2010, 65–66), but frequently they do not. We do not yet know whether psychedelics are in themselves sufficient for more enduring unselfing to take place in general: there are some fortuitous cases of course, and some data about for example the increases of prosociality and openness to experiences, but there also remains lots of room for scepticism. At least we can say that they can momentarily show certain possible ways of experiencing and relating to the world (cf. Letheby 2016; 2017b). Roger Walsh compares psychedelic experiences to a flash of lightning that might offer glimpses of “deeper, more accurate views of the mind, of cosmos and of reality” (Walsh 2001, 22). These glimpses and kinds of knowledge can induce long-lasting changes in our understanding and cognitive maps, but there is much more work to be done after the momentary insight (ibid.; cf. Masters & Houston 1966, 259–260).⁵³ In order for psychedelic experiences to give more enduring benefits, the combination of psychedelics and spiritual practice and psychotherapies is suggested by authors such as Carhart-Harris and Friston (2019), Walsh (2001, 20) and many psychedelic elders (numerous examples can be found in Roberts 2001, Walsh & Grob 2005).

With these caveats, let’s explore the perspective shifts that can happen and which work as proof of unselfing occurring in certain psychedelic experiences. Next a group of intertwined perspective shifts are highlighted, which might often follow mystical-type or ego-dissolution experiences, but which can happen with less dramatic ‘trips’: increased sense of meaningfulness, awe and wonder directed at the world, and increased sense of

⁵² For example, psychedelics, especially in lower doses, often increase reflection and emotional processing, often tied to autobiographical themes. These, I would say are only in apparent contradiction to unselfing, as they can be in a dialectic relationship with and intertwine with unselfing: psychedelics seem to foster well-being both via dealing with egocentric concerns and via more transpersonal ways.

⁵³ Often some other tools are needed for maintenance and integration of the insights gained and the unselfing that has happened. Walsh treats this problem, using Piaget’s terms: psychedelic experiences might be either assimilated or reduced to already existing cognitive structures, or they can be accommodated in such a way that old cognitive structures are modified (Walsh 2001, 20). The actions and inner work that person makes after the experience, how he or she uses the experience, are paramount.

connectedness. Then I will discuss certain perspectival changes associated with the changes in the sense of self, and finally the wider relevance of these changes.

5.1.1 Perspective Shifts Induced by Psychedelics

Meaningfulness

In psychedelic experiences the world is often enhanced with heightened sense of meaningfulness (Hartogsohn 2018; Shanon 2002, 61). Egocentric salience might be normally constraining the sense of meaningfulness, salience and attention to only some things, only to biologically useful (Huxley 1954) or personally relevant (Letheby 2017a; Letheby & Gerrans 2017). Psychedelics seem to open up this narrowing down of attention and sense of meaningfulness. From the viewpoint of ego salience, this might be partially a result of the salience decoupling from the sense of self, and thus the salience would be more equally distributed and not only confined to certain objects or goals. When this kind of attribution of salience relaxes, the world is experienced as meaningful in general. For example, Huxley (1954, 5, 16) beautifully describes his encounter with flowers in their immensely enhanced beauty and meaningfulness, and encounter with a chair in its beingness. During the mescaline trip these ordinarily unimportant objects barely receiving attention in the course of an ordinary day turned into sources of profound epiphanies. Huxley (1954, 7, 10) claims that mescaline intoxication reveals “the glory, the infinite value and meaningfulness of naked existence, of the given, unconceptualized event” and the “knowledge of the intrinsic significance of every existent”, which are perhaps available to some artists and mystics all the time. During psychedelic experience the salience attributed to things, the evaluation of importance and meaning of things can become detached from common egocentric concerns. As Huxley notes about mescaline intoxication:

Though perception is enormously improved, the will suffers a profound change for the worse. The mescaline taker sees no reason doing anything in particular and finds most of the causes which, at ordinary times, he was prepared to act and suffer, profoundly uninteresting. He can not be bothered with them, for the good reason that he has better things to think about. (Huxley 1954, 12)

In Huxley’s case the general sense of meaningfulness made him momentarily indifferent to ordinary utilitarian and instrumental pursuit. On the other hand, this sense of meaningfulness can be related to enhanced perception of actual possibilities. In a paper analyzing changes in cancer patients treated with psilocybin, Swift et al. (2017) note:

Another significant pathway that could explain improvements in anxiety and depression relates to the more positive, transcendent, and life-affirming aspects of the psilocybin experience. *Participants spoke of being pulled from the habitual patterns and overwhelm of cancer and of being given an expanded perspective on what was felt to be most important and meaningful in life, which endured beyond the session.* Transcendence, as Cassel (1982) wrote, “is probably the most powerful way in which one is restored to wholeness,” as it locates the person in a “far larger landscape” of possibility, which can bring greater meaning to suffering. (Swift et al 2017, 24, emphasis added)

These “expanded perspectives”, “far larger landscapes” perceived, and connecting to a “deeper mode of existence” are precisely the kind of perspectival widening I’m after. In this case the shift happened from perspective narrowed down by the suffering and anxiety caused by cancer to a perspective that enabled persons in case to better assess and see their situation in a way that was not possible in ordinary life. From an epistemic point of view, Letheby (2017b, 37–38) argues that psychedelics can restore modal knowledge in a situation where the perceived possibilities have narrowed down.

Awe and Wonder

Similarly, increased sense of awe and wonder towards the natural world and towards the cosmos at large are often reported happening during and after psychedelic trips (Letheby 2017a, 637; Shanon 2002, 61–62). On cognitive levels philosophical and metaphysical ideation and reflection can be fostered during psychedelic experiences (Shanon 2010, 269). This is not surprising, if philosophy begins in wonder, as Socrates is claimed to have said. Relatedly, Tupper (2003) has argued that psychedelics might foster what is termed by the psychologist Gardner existential intelligence, which “involves having a heightened capacity to appreciate and attend to the cosmological enigmas that define the human condition, an exceptional awareness of the metaphysical, ontological, and epistemological mysteries that have been a perennial concern for people of all cultures” (Tupper 2003, 503). Tupper (2014) has also argued how these sentiments of wonder and curiosity fostered by psychedelics are useful from a pedagogic angle, as they can be seen as motivators for a constructive and creative relationship with the world.

Increased sense of awe and wonder are very much related to the changes in salience and ensuing redirection of attention. They are good examples of states when our perception is less filtered by the habitual egocentric attributions of salience, the attention is freed to open to the world and to wider perspectives (Letheby 2017a, 633–638; Shanon 2002, 205).

These emotions have epistemic and transformative dimensions related to unselfing and self-transcendence. States of awe and wonder are in general beneficial emotions, and they are forms of self-transcendence in themselves (Yaden et al. 2017; Chirico & Yaden 2018). These states have intrinsic epistemic and transformative dimensions, as they open the person to different framings of relevance (cf. Vervaeke & Ferraro 2013; 2016). According to Vervaeke and Ferraro (2013), in these kinds of changes such as awe, wonder or overview effect – whether induced by spiritual exercises or psychedelic experiences – the salience attributed to the self and our perspective shifts: they alter what we consider salient, significant or relevant. In these states the horizon of our framings opens up: they are not about getting more quantitative information about some phenomena as is with curiosity, but they foster qualitative shifts in the perspective to the world and the self.⁵⁴ They can make one more humble, and broaden our attention and perspective away from egocentric and instrumental concerns. They are thus both results and causes of unselfing, and can foster a self-reinforcing dynamic, as Letheby (2017a, 633–638) points out.

Increased Sense of Connectedness

In a recent article Carhart Harris et al. (2018) observe that psychedelics increase the sense of connectedness to oneself, the world and other people. They hypothesize this as one central and general mechanism that might underlie the experienced therapeutic effects of psychedelics. Conversely, in most mental illnesses the sense of connection is reduced. It is extraordinary that psychedelics, unlike many other recreational drugs and psychopharma, increase connectedness both in short and long-term. Shanon analyzes this theme as follows, connecting it to changes in experience of the self:

The connectedness is manifested in the feeling that the boundary and division between one and the world dissolve and in ensuing sentiments of great empathy towards entities and beings other than oneself. These feelings may be coupled with the sensing of strong affinity, blending, identification, and even unification with what ordinarily is “other”. (Shanon 2002, 205)

In recent qualitative studies on psilocybin therapy the increased sense of interconnectedness is further stressed (Belser et al. 2017, 16–17; Watts et al. 2017). One

⁵⁴ Vervaeke has dealt with this theme in his lectures, one of which can be found in written version here: <https://modernstoicism.com/the-view-from-above-a-transformation-of-perspectival-and-participatory-knowing-by-john-vervaeke/> (Time of retrieval 20.12.2019).

participant treated for anxiety related to cancer for example came to realize that “life and death are part of one circle”, stating “we’re all kind of a greater whole.” Another gained “feeling of connection to all of humanity”, and third achieved “a greater understanding of global connectedness”, describing that “everything is connected—you know, it’s not people—it’s animals, it’s trees—everything is interwoven, and that’s a big relief. It’s a big comfort”. Yet other participants “described a feeling of connection to nature and to the greater world” (Belser et al. 2017, 16–17). These different effects combined can bring a sense of intimacy with life, a discernible shift to a more present-centered mindset. This beautiful passage from a patient describing the effects of psilocybin therapy and how it woke her up to the simple pleasure of being alive:

I feel like a whole bunch of crap has been dumped off the surface. This stuff that made my world shut down so much and made me look at the ground and watch the clock numbers clicking by. There’s life and so many things going on, just watching that tree over there blowing in the breeze, seeing people in the street, and all the different people in vehicles rushing by! I just feel good about being alive. . . . It’s always there; we just do not notice, and I’m trying to notice and not forget that I can see it at any time. I can hear it any time. It’s like waking up in the most profound way, that this is really what life is, it’s really like this. We’re just not noticing. (Belser et al. 2017, 375)

This passage draws attention to how remarkably the experiential perspective and perceived context changes: things that were not perceived as salient – that were, in a sense, forgotten – were rediscovered. The attention was with a great force drawn away from egocentric narratives and associated modes of attention to the actual world around the person.

Similarly, Watts et al. (2017) in a study concerning patients suffering from depression state that as result of psilocybin treatment, the discovery of new perspectives was common (Watts et al. 2017, 532). Increased sense of connectedness and acceptance were according to the patient accounts the main themes underpinning the therapeutic effect on depression, both themes related to the ability to look at the situation from a wider perspective. Also “connection to a spiritual principle” was reported, for instance an insight experienced by some patients about love as a cosmic force (Watts et al. 2017, 535). The combined sentiments of love and interconnectedness dominated the experience of the patient who described that “[during the dose] I was everybody, unity, one life with 6 billion faces, I was the one asking for love and giving love, I was swimming in the sea, and the sea was me”. Another one describes that: “Like google earth, I had zoomed out. [For weeks afterwards], I

was absolutely connected to myself, to every living thing, to the universe.” (ibid.). Both universal love and the experience of zooming out very clearly point to unselfing and to the shifting of experiential perspective or frame of reference.

Carhart-Harris et al (2018) suggest that the increased sense of connection might be caused by experiences of unity associated with mystical experiences – sometimes singled out as the core feature of mystical experiences. It seems in some psychedelic experiences the boundary between subject and object becomes more porous, increasing the sense of connection, and that the experiences of unity are a culmination of this. Psychedelic experiences, it could be claimed, acquaintance ourselves with the cosmos around us. By shedding the walls of separation erected by our egocentric perspective they can reveal the world that perhaps a moment ago seemed cold and meaningless in another light. The sheer intensity of these experiences brings us to confront the world in its awe-inspiring breadth and depth. Aesthetic appreciation to myriad details, the awe towards the wonder of being in its immensity and grandeur are nurturing, life affirming changes in perspective that psychedelics might bring (cf. Shanon 2002, 149, 176, 264). Related to these and other changes induced by psychedelics, Letheby has argued that psychedelic experiences can give first-hand knowledge about one’s own psychological potential (Letheby 2017b, 37–38; cf. Shanon 2002, 196). They might teach us not new propositions but new ways of being in the world and relating to the world around us. Further, these perspectival changes are intimately related to changes in the sense of self.

5.1.2 Altered Perspectives on the Self

As discussed in chapter two, psychedelics can induce both minor and greater changes in the sense of self. These experiences can be looked at from the perspective of unselfing. To take an example, Pollan accounts how his experience of ego-dissolution opened for him the understanding about radically different mode of being:

[...] This might not come as a surprise to Buddhists, transcendentalists or experienced meditators, but it was sure news to me, who has never felt anything but identical to my ego. Could it be there is another ground on which to plant our feet? For the first time since embarking on this project, I began to understand what the volunteers in the cancer-anxiety trials had been trying to tell me: how it was that a psychedelic journey had granted them a perspective from which the very worst life can throw at us, up to and including death, could be regarded objectively and accepted with equanimity. (Pollan 2018, 265)

Here Pollan is referring to a central therapeutic example of perspective changes, that of terminal-cancer patients. According to recent studies, psychedelics have been very effective in reducing the fear of death in terminal patients (Belser et al 2017; Gasser et al. 2015). To quote one patient:

It was less about my illness. I was able to put it into perspective. ... Not to see oneself with one's sickness as center. There are more important things in life. ... The evolution of human kind for example. ... Your Inner Ego gets diminished, I believe, and you are looking at the whole. (Gasser et al. 2015, 62; Quoted in Letheby 2017a, 627)

A central therapeutic mechanism is insights and altered perspectives to one's own place in the cosmos, the importance attributed to the ego in the big picture, concurring with the general trend that the mystical experiences induced by psychedelics mediate their therapeutic effects (Griffiths 2006, 2008; Yaden et al. 2017; Johnson et al. 2018). This is part of their ability to break and remake framings in general, observed both in theoretical and qualitative works (Carhart-Harris & Friston 2019; Gasser et al. 2015, 61–21). Letheby offers a quote from researcher Grob on this matter:

Under the influence of hallucinogens, individuals transcend their primary identification with their bodies and experience ego-free states before the time of their actual physical demise, and return with a new perspective and profound acceptance of the life constant, change. ... This implicit acceptance of the inevitable cycles of life leads to a drastically altered approach to what time is remaining without the panic, fear, pain, and dependency that were previously so overwhelming. (Grob 2007, 213; Quoted in Letheby 2017a, 633)

Also, a similarity to so-called overview-effect experienced by astronauts (Yaden et al. 2016) have been observed as a result of psychedelic ingestion. During these kinds of experiences the world is seen as if from above, a bird's eye perspective, and the self is experienced as extremely small (Flanagan & Graham 2017, 302–307). This kind of change in perspective can be a transformative experience and give a glimpse about one's own position as part of a larger whole. Psychotherapist Vaughan (1983) accounts her own spiritual experience during a psychedelic trip and tells how during this experience her self-centered concerns took a completely insignificant role. Although her personal problems stayed the same, her perspective on these problems changed to a perspective of a much wider whole, thus nullifying their importance. A notable similarity can be found to spiritual exercises in the

context of antique philosophy, where stoics and platonists on purpose tried to adapt this kind of 'cosmic' perspective and thus set their personal lives and worries into a new context (Hadot 2004, 209–214). Thus, the most far-out ego-dissolutions are not necessarily always the most relevant. Sufficient for unselfing are also the more modest changes and the aftereffects ego-dissolutions can impart (cf. Letheby & Gerrans 2017, 6–7).

5.1.3 Psychedelics as a Form of Naturalistic Spirituality

These existential and perspectival changes are valuable in themselves. The therapeutic, existential, spiritual and creative dimensions that psychedelic experience contains surely have potential to enrich human experience at this age, when too many find themselves amidst experience impoverished by the meaning crisis of secularized late modern society. Some scholars suggest that altered states of consciousness, including psychedelic experiences, could play a role to counteract booming forces of addictions, depression and anxiety plaguing our societies, and in solving the existential vacuum created by fragmented worldviews and failing grand narratives of the past, and the often disenchanting attitude of secular worldviews (cf. Vervaeke & Ferraro 2013; Winkelmann 2014; Letheby 2017a; Steinhart 2018). As argued by Letheby (2017a) and Steinhart (2018), psychedelics could play their role in the development of spirituality that is compatible with naturalistic and scientific worldview. Similarly, Letheby (2017a) and Flanagan (2017) have suggested that psychedelics might contribute to a project of naturalistic eudaimonics, that is, pursuing “an empirically based inquiry into the conditions under which human beings can flourish and live meaningful lives” (Letheby 2017a, 626).

Letheby (2017a) claims that by arousal of wonder and awe and by the changes in the sense of self psychedelics could inject meaning to the existential vacuum of meaninglessness and valuelessness often claimed to haunt modern culture. Psychedelics might thus work as an existential medicine to counter this meaninglessness of modern age. The assumed antidote psychedelics give does not necessarily entail rejecting the scientific picture of the cosmos, or alter propositional beliefs, but, as it were, injecting meaning into the picture from inside. Significantly, the central facet of psychedelic experiences Letheby (2017a, 632, 638) sees valuable for the naturalistic spirituality is the reduction of egoic centering and ensuing enlargement of perspective. Letheby claims that psychedelics can cause “a transformative process that involves broadening perspective beyond the individual self, and apprehending its interconnectedness, transience, and ephemerality” (Letheby 2017a, 638). That is, unselfing in our terminology. Letheby notes, right on the point, that this

surely deserves the name spirituality if anything does (ibid.). He points out that especially if the mind is constricted to pathological degree, and loosening or disintegration of the self is what can open the perspective to broader horizons, and concludes:

Naturalistic spirituality is all about breaking down the illusion of being a solid, separate, and persistent self, sharply distinct and apart from the rest of the world, opening the door to a greater intimacy with life. By breaking the spell of narrowly self-focused rumination, psychedelics liberate attention from its egocentric bondage, enlarging perspectives, and expanding the mind. The resultant wonder and awe at the universe and the human condition does not depend on the acceptance or rejection of any specific, substantive metaphysical belief, but nonetheless leads to the kind of peace that is all apiece with profound appreciation of the natural world just as it is, in all its vastness, complexity, and mystery. (Letheby 2017a, 639)

Thus, psychedelic experiences seem at least sometimes to have the ability to radically resituate a person and open him or her to the bigger picture. It seems that many of the perspective changes are intimately related with situating ourselves within a larger whole. This might further explain why psychedelic induced mystical experiences show superior ability to heal and transform, and why they are apt to deliver prosocial effects, if these experiences do the trick most completely (Griffith et al. 2006, 2008).

The kind of wider situatedness self-transcendence can impart brings us to acknowledge our own mortality and transience (cf. Shanon 2002, 145). In another paper he has argued that psychedelic experiences can give direct experiential knowledge about the insubstantiality of the self (Letheby 2017b, 36–37). As Murdoch saw, there might be an important link between Goodness, virtue and the seeing the momentariness and vainness of our lives (Murdoch 2001, 103). Situating ourselves into a larger whole is not only existentially and therapeutically but also morally relevant. No wonder that many religions, forms of spirituality and mystic traditions have found a natural convergence between these domains. Evaluative changes are in the heart of unselfing and the existential dimensions involved in psychedelic use. These evaluative changes also underpin their effects on moral perception which shall be dealt with next.

5.2 Psychedelic Moral Perception

I propose that one reason psychedelics deliver changes to values could be attributed to their unselfing effect, and the ensuing enhancement of perception of values. As I just argued, psychedelics can occasion moments when the egocentric salience, the evaluation of

importance of things, is relaxed and the perspective is subsequently opened. By unselfing they reduce the evaluation of the world from the perspective and the needs of self, and on the other hand increase the amount of caring attention paid to other people and to the world. According to the scheme built so far, the enhanced, more attentive perception and reduced influence of preconceptions and habitual egocentric ways of seeing should in turn enhance the moral perception. I support this claim by discussing examples of two kinds: cases where attunement to deep values already held but disconnected from occurs, and cases in which intrinsic values are perceived in a manner not perceived before. Next I discuss these two options and tie them together by conceptualizing them as forms of contextual widening. It should be kept in mind that we are discussing certain possibilities inherent in psychedelic experiences, and not all of them are as elevating as these examples.

5.2.1 Calibrating Inner Compass

The values that are perceived during psychedelic experiences are not necessarily a cognitive revelation or something radically new. The changes in salience and perspective can lead to a better attunement to core or deep values one already knew but which have been somehow forgotten or disconnected from (cf. Noorami 2018, 9; Swift et al. 2017). This is especially evident in many mental health issues in which the experiential context is apparently narrowed down and a sense of disconnection from the world experienced. In such a situation psychedelics can function as a reminder, to widen the context to a degree that is not available in ordinary day-to-day life and reconnect us back to the world and the values. To understand these changes, a metaphor of ‘calibrating inner compass’ might be helpful, as the experiences can help one to recognize and connect to the deep values that are easily forgotten in the routine of daily life.

For example, Swift et al. (2017) write that cancer patients treated with psilocybin claimed that they could better reconnect to long-held core values and beliefs as a result of the treatment (Noorami 2018, 9). Another example is the observed effect of ‘revised life priorities’ from psilocybin therapy, experienced by all of 13 cancer patients suffering from anxiety who attended this study of Belser et al. (2017, 374):

Participants described *a shift in their life priorities* away from the busy demands of modern work life, to find a deeper or more authentic mode of existence [...] *These participants came to “remember” during their psilocybin session what to them was most important about life: “It felt whole and complete and at peace. . . . We forget what’s really important; we get carried away with work and making our money and*

paying our bills, and this is just not what life is about.” Participants were compelled to reorient their lives afterward in a way that continued to connect them to a similar place and nourish that part of themselves. (Belsler et al. 2017, 374, emphasis added)

Significantly, the life priorities shifted away from instrumental pursuit such as demands associated with work and money to something more fundamental – to those things which have more intrinsic value. This quote attests that these re-evaluative processes can have a long-lasting impact and be felt as important insight even after the experience.

Another example about the widening perspective from a narrowed down situation and associated changes in values are the cures from addictions reported from psychedelic treatment (Winkelman 2014; Johnson et al. 2014; 2016). Although addiction is a complex phenomena involving social, neural and psychodynamic processes, it can be analyzed from the perspective of misguided and narrowed attribution of salience. Strong addictive desires have in common with values the feature that they are about perceiving some things as salient. Unfortunately, they just make things salient that are not really so valuable and make us care less about those things that should matter. Thus, addictions constrain or narrow down the perspective of the subject and thus jeopardize living according to deeper, more comprehensive values. If the misguided egocentric appraisal of salience that is driving the addictive behavior is disrupted, a moment is created to look at the situation from a wider perspective, and this might recalibrate the moral compass, and in best case change the behavior of the person afterwards. This line of thinking is supported by the suggestion that addictive habits may arise from an experience of disconnection (Noorani et al. 2018, 9). From the viewpoint of values and salience the disconnection is also disconnection from more substantial values, and addictive habits probably also reciprocally cause this sense of disconnection as they uphold the misguided attribution of salience.

Remarkably, in a recent study that treated tobacco addiction with psilocybin, quitting smoking was often reported in retrospect as one of the least important effects from the holistic therapeutic journeys that participants experienced (Noorani et al. 2018, 8). Significantly from our point of view, such things as increased aesthetic appreciation, altruism, prosocial behavior and new hobbies – that is, changes in valuation and behavior changes reflecting these – were reported by participants to be results of the treatment that mattered more (Noorani et al. 2018, 8–9). Also, participants felt that interconnectedness experienced in psychedelic experiences overshadowed the connectedness felt to cigarette smoking (ibid.). Subsequently to these new perspectives smoking was not seen and experienced as such a big thing anymore, and more value was attributed to other things

(Noorani et al. 2018, 11). Noorani et al. (2018, 9) report that the experiences of interconnectedness, awe and curiosity, and positive affect “also appeared to carry forward to participants’ lives after the study, and to extend beyond smoking to include persistent connection to loved ones and to the world at large”.

These changes that connect one to core values do not happen in isolation but are tied to other complex processes in psychedelic experiences such as emotional processes, autobiographical reflection and changes in perspectives discussed above. Some of themes, especially those centered around personal self might superficially be seen as contrary to the unselfing, the lessening of egocentric focus. Picturing the movement as a continuum of contextual widening might help. Before turning the attention away from self, the context first widens to encompass one’s life as fully as possible. Even if we stay within the personal domain, one’s perspective can be enlarged from narrow self-focus, or focus on some aspect of their life (for example, a strong addictive desire, a certain narrative that is often dominating the vision or a recent work project that has to be done) to a much wider context, enabling the opening of the attention to features of one life that are neglected in the ordinary day-to-day life. Thus, some of the personal processes can be seen as part of this widening thrust. On the other hand, various emotional processes can be involved in the evaluative ‘reboot’ or re-contextualization into a wider or more comprehensive context.⁵⁵ The processes of contextual widening in psychedelic states seems to be often laden with strong affect, and almost always with a strong sense of meaningfulness. In psychedelic experiences various salient themes – some of them autobiographical, some of them not – tend to pop-up in an organic and self-guiding fashion.⁵⁶ This would fit with the explanation that our framings and top-down models (related for example to autobiographical narratives and sense of self) are relaxed, and subsequently room is created for a more bottom-up or ‘anarchic’ neural dynamic (cf. Carhart-Harris & Friston 2019).

⁵⁵ Probably emotional processing and a better attunement to one’s emotions are (on top of transpersonal insights) a significant cause for the sense of reconnection and a source of perspectival widening (Winkelman 2001, 2017; Maslow 1971, 104). Crying in psychedelic states is one case in point. While crying one often comes to realize what are the themes that are in a sense alive within oneself, and one is recontextualized as salient themes can ‘pop up’ than previous were unrecognized and sensed perhaps as vague anxiety.

⁵⁶ Similar dynamic is observed in meditation retreats, when the silencing of discursive thought and stopping of instrumental activity often leads to salient personal material to come up in one’s mind. supporting this widening trust in both meditation retreat and in psychedelic experiences, there is the component of mindfulness, or becoming more conscious of the processes going on in one’s field of awareness, and associated insightful seeing into workings of one’s mind, as well as generally heightened sensitivity (Soler et al. 2016; Shanon 2002; 332).

One general phrasing would be to say that psychedelics increase the ability to listen, or be receptive, to the context. This claim is in line with an empirical study by Carhart-Harris et al. (2018) who concludes that psychedelics increase context sensitivity. We can be connected to the whole context of our personal life to various degrees. Our personal life is rooted in the wider social context of our close persons, friends and relatives, and further embedded in even wider social, ecological and cosmological contexts. Psychedelic moral perception is closely tied to a process of remembering these wider contexts.⁵⁷ The phenomenon of widening the usual outlook on life does not occur only in cases where the perspective is unusually narrow, like in the cases of mental health issues of different kinds. Although the recent studies on psychedelics are carried out in a therapeutic setting, there is lots of anecdotal material⁵⁸ and studies on people in full health experimenting with psychedelics. Significantly, as these and following examples show, this self-guiding process of contextual widening does neither halt at personal or social level, but the recontextualization can go beyond this personal point of view to self-transcendence proper. The evaluative assessment of one's own life and the wider context of life that one is part of is enhanced, sometimes reaching to such depth which initiates a radical reorganization and existential transformation in person's life (cf. Shanon 2002, 64–65).

⁵⁷ In general, how to choose which context is relevant at any given moment is an extremely difficult computational task. Vervaeke and Ferraro (2016) with their theory about relevance realization underscore these issues: for solving any kind of problem one has to be able to constrict the space of potential solutions, and, of course, to be able to identify the problem. Philosophically speaking, there is no single normative answer which context should be chosen as relevant in any given moment: it depends. Values are clearly related to this issue also: they in a sense tell what is relevant and what is the context one should choose. But, still there is a lot of issues. Even a person who endorses certain values has to be able to flexibly navigate and choose when and in what way one could instantiate these values. At certain moments one has to be in an egocentric perspective and deal with problems that require adapting a relatively narrow context. Sometimes wider context is helpful. Perhaps an important thing is to be able to have also a certain kind of interpenetration of different contexts.

⁵⁸ In the cultural history of psychedelics it is well known that many famous authors writing about psychedelics went through psychedelic-induced processes of change that turned into spiritual journeys which often loosened their metaphysical beliefs and ways of life in a profound way. Notable examples might include the infamous couple ex-Harvard professors Richard Alpert (also known as Ram Dass) and Timothy Leary turned to counterculture icons (for these two, see for example Stevens 1987), famous pioneer of psychedelic therapy Stanislav Grof (2005, 119–150) and John C. Lilly (1972), a top scientist-turned-into-mystic. On the other hand, some already deep in the study of contemplative traditions got experiential affirmation for their beliefs, such as for the perennial philosophy of Huxley (1954) or joyous cosmology of Alan Watts (1962), or the childhood mystical experiences experienced by Albert Hofmann (1980; 2005, 47–54). Also a huge rise of interest in eastern meditative practices coincided with the rise of psychedelic counterculture in the West: instead of mere coincidence, it is plausible that psychedelic experimentation and already formed cultural associations between psychedelic experiences and eastern mysticism lead many to seek more gradual paths to the directions psychedelic experiences had laid before them.

Thus, thinking about moral dilemmas, which are not part of these organic contexts, is not what one expects to do in psychedelic states. Although the contextual widening can lead to pondering of ethical issues. Themes such as those concerning good and evil, values and meaning in life can figure in psychedelic vision and reflections (Shanon 2002, 173–175). Masters & Houston (1966, 255) report findings of an early study conducted on healthy subjects in non-religious settings that found that after 10 month of an LSD session one third of the 194 participants had felt a significant increase in their interests in ethics, and half of the participants in the meaning of life, both themes intimately intertwined with widened evaluative context and values. Also, some of the examples Watts et al. (2017) have about the increased connection to the world are cases of moral deliberation. Four patients had in their sessions strong insights into the European refugee crisis that was going on, and others reported becoming concerned about global issues afterwards (Watts et al. 2017, 534). As one patient put it: “I got a wider perspective, I stepped back. It helped me appreciate that the world is a big place that there’s a lot more going on than just the minor things that were going on in my head.” (ibid).

5.2.2 Psychedelic Experiences and Perception of Intrinsic Values

Based on the discussion of chapter 4, the (intrinsic) value configurations in the world are better perceived if we go through inner change which involves reduction in the – as we employ more attention and are able to find new framings. If some psychedelic experiences both unself, and disrupt old framings and help finding new ones (as argued by Carhart-Harris & Friston 2019), we should find cases of perceiving new moral configurations. If one looks at the actual experiences people have, there clearly are examples of psychedelic experiences where this kind of moral perception occurs. Here I focus on the case of values. It seems that especially intrinsic values, the inherent value of things not reducible to instrumental usefulness for the self can be better glimpsed, in such a manner that totally novel perspectives and perceptions are opened for the subject as a result of widened evaluative context.

To give an example, in Albert Hofmann’s memoir *LSD: My Problem Child* there is a recollection about a young businessman who comes to see Hofmann after LSD ignited his aesthetic capacities and opened up other before unventured areas of human experience:

He thanked me for the creation of LSD, which had given his life another direction. He had been 100 percent a businessman, with a purely materialistic world view. LSD

had opened his eyes to the spiritual aspect of life. Now he possessed a sense for art, literature, and philosophy and was deeply concerned with religious and metaphysical questions. (Hofmann 1980, 93)

This case does not only match certain stereotypes about psychedelics, but also exemplifies very well the kind of morally relevant inner change Murdoch wanted to highlight (see section 4.2.3). One could argue that in this case the businessman relaxed his routines to evaluate the world from the perspective from certain egocentric aims – in this case perhaps related to economic pursuits – and thus better perceived some values he had not before perceived such as beauty and truth. The person subsequently became interested in art, philosophy and spirituality – the central collective efforts aimed at going in the direction of these perceived values – which lacked from a life aimed solely at instrumental, material success.⁵⁹ Similarly Esley quotes older research by Savage:

Savage et al. (1966) reported data on a subset of psychiatrically healthy individuals who had complained of a lack of purpose or meaning in their lives. Following a supervised intake of LSD, the participants scored higher on self-report measures of self-actualization and creativity. As a whole, the participants in this study reported feeling a greater sense of meaning and purpose in their lives, oneness with humanity, and decreased valuation of superficial pursuits such as material gains and social status. (Elsley 2017, 3)

This older study supports theories of Maslow explored earlier, as they show a correlation of self-actualization and a shift in valuations away from superficial instrumental pursuits – presumably because some other values that give deeper sense of meaning were perceived. In both of these examples we can note the decreased valuation of superficial pursuit. Also, recent research pointing to reduced valuation of economic success (Lerner and Lyvers 2006) and increased appreciation of nature and art (Nour et al. 2017; Studerus et al. 2011 Forstmann & Sagioglou 2017). Relatedly, Watts et al. (2017) claim that as result of psilocybin treatment, the discovery of new values or perspectives was common (Watts et al. 2017, 532). All these fit very well with the notion that inherent value of things outside of the self are better grasped in certain psychedelic experiences. In some cases, as the businessman who visited Hofmann, these values might be something not before glimpsed, if the life so far has exclusively centered around instrumental pursuit of one sort or another. In this interpretation

⁵⁹ The spiritual aspects which are prominent in the quoted passage also beg for explanation, but this has to be done in some other context.

not only the subjective sense of meaningfulness is enhanced as Savage (1966), Lerner & Lyvers (2006) and Hartogsohn (2018) note, but the sense of meaningfulness enhances because some real meanings such as values were perceived, and some alignment resulted from this re-evaluation. In some examples above the persons in case were otherwise healthy but were in a sense missing something in their valuations, reflected in the sense of lack of meaning and disinterest in non-superficial pursuits.

Similarly, Shanon notes that people sometimes develop a more sustained increased appreciation for art and beauty of nature after psychedelic experiences (Shanon 2002, 176; Huxley 1954, 4–6). In some psychedelic experiences the aesthetic perception is greatly heightened, to the extent that Shanon claims that “the ayahuasca experience is cardinally aesthetic” (Shanon 2002, 176). Beauty is perhaps intrinsic value most commonly perceived in psychedelic experiences. For Murdoch (1997, 369) perception of beauty was also a prime example of unselfing. Although it is likely, according to the framework of Maslow, that psychedelic-induced peak-experiences (and perhaps also less intense experiences) might lead to the perception of other being-values as well. Shanon comments that moral learning and commitment to certain values can also occur:

Very often, the Ayahuasca intoxication is experienced as a lesson in morals. Reflection about certain values and a sense of commitment towards them seems to be especially salient. Those reported by many individuals include personal responsibility, justice, and love. Also common is the appreciation of the significance of faith and hope, patience, and humility. [...] Common is the appreciation that values—in particular, love and justice—are not confined to the province of human life but they also apply to existence at large and to the forces or beings that govern the universe. (Shanon 2002, 174)

The perspective sometimes occasioned by psychedelics might let these values to be glimpsed, as the evaluative context widens – these do not sound like mundane reflections one has while for example going to a grocery store, which usually center around the self and a more narrow spatial and temporal context, like thinking about the next meal. Especially interesting is this quote is the perception of these values as forces or beings governing the universe – perhaps a bit anthropomorphized perception of these intrinsic values as real patterns of the world, instantiated in various things that manifest these values. Shanon also comments on experiences that have the Supreme Good as their theme:

Finally, there are visions in which one feels one is encountering the Supreme Good. A major impression these visions had on me is the (Platonic) conclusion that ultimately, the ethical and the aesthetical as well as the true are the same. I have heard similar assessments made by many other people. (Shanon 2002, 174)

As a point of comparison, Maslow stated that B-values are facets of a single undivided whole (Maslow 1971, 186). This should not surprise us, if the reality behind these various intrinsic values after all is one and undivided whole. Both Huxley (2012, 100-101) and Shanon (2002, 246, 396) have drawn connection between visionary and mystical experiences induced by psychedelics, and certain themes explored in the dialogues of foremost advocate of value realism, namely Plato (for example, the speech of Diotima in *Symposium* or ascend of the soul in *Phaedrus*), whose later followers shared a highly unitative view of the cosmos as being emanation from the One. Shanon repeatedly mentions platonic themes in his cartography of ayahuasca experiences and proposes platonism as one metaphysical framework for interpreting psychedelic experiences (Shanon 2012, 67, 132, 362–363, 388, 393). Further he notes that many ayahuasca-using indigenous tribes have remarkably similar notions about semantics and meaning as independent of time, in a manner similar to metaphysically grounded universal meanings or ideas that Plato argued for (Shanon 2002, 248–250).⁶⁰ Shanon also notes that ayahuasca church Santo Daime has even a very similar conception about the unity of core values of beauty, truth and rightness as Plato had. Psychedelic experiences may sometimes nudge one to adopt a value realist stance, presumably by revealing the same intrinsic or being-values Maslow argued are revealed during PE's.

Similarly, the perception of intrinsic value can be connected to the sense of sacredness often experienced in psychedelic experiences and in mystical experiences in general (Shanon 2002, 156, 262). As one informant of Shanon puts it: "This drink [ayahuasca] introduced me to the dimension of the sacred" (ibid.). Whatever metaphysical interpretations we have of the sacredness, the sense of sacred it is clearly related to

⁶⁰ Most extravagantly, hypotheses have even been laid out that an important religious institution of the culture of ancient Athens, namely Eleusinian mysteries, utilized psychedelics (Wasson et al. 2008). Platon as a citizen of Athens probably took part in Eleusinian mysteries, a central religious institution of the city state with thousands of attendants and ingested the purportedly vision-inducing potion termed *kykeon*, drank in the ceremony culminating these mysteries. Shanon (2002, 396) notes this theory and proposes that perhaps the inspiration for Plato's thinking about the Platonic forms or ideas derives from visionary experiences, and not just from abstract philosophizing, as already suggested by Huxley (1954).

perception of deep intrinsic value and involves a perspective shift away from attitude of instrumental rationality. The sacred is that which is most intrinsically valuable.

To shortly turn to environmental values, psychedelic experiences have the capacity to foster environmentally friendly values (Nour et al. 2017; Forstmann and Sagioglou 2017; Studerus et al. 2011). For example, in the study of Watts discussed above the felt connection to nature was observed to increase, and many subjects directed their thinking to climate change. Authors explain that it seems that patients in depression had not realized that they were disconnected from nature and missing that connection until the psilocybin experience reminded of its value (Watts et al. 2017, 534). Forstmann & Sagioglou (2017) suggest that people might become more environmentally friendly because their self-construal changes: "lifetime experience with psychedelics in particular may indeed contribute to people's pro-environmental behavior by changing their self-construal in terms of an incorporation of the natural world, regardless of core personality traits or general propensity to consume mind-altering substances." A recent study named "From Egoism to Ecoism" found that the increase in nature relatedness was mediated by the degree to which subjects experienced ego-dissolutions, suggesting a causal connection (Kettner et al. 2019). To accommodate these findings to present framework, these changes in self-construal fit with the idea of unselfing, and probably make subjects perceive the value of the natural world in a different way. If the self and nature are not experienced as separate from each other than before, the value of nature would in a sense be incorporated to the egocentric salience. After these changes the intrinsic value of nature might be perceived as higher compared to former egocentric modes of looking at nature, which presumably framed nature as more separate from oneself and more in terms of instrumental utility.

Thus, psychedelic peak-experiences can sometimes directly sensitize us to experiencing intrinsic values such as beauty and goodness for example in instances of art or nature, or as a *gestalt* -property characterizing the whole universe. The perception of values might further be enhanced by the general ability of psychedelic experience to disrupt top-down models, the perceptual schemas based on past experiences (Carhart-Harris & Friston 2019). Combined with what we know about the disruptive effect on old cognitive constructs, perception of being-values might change deeply seated beliefs and instrumental attitudes about the good. Both the perception of being-values and the relaxation of egocentric attributions of salience might have corrective epistemic dimensions: going through such experiences might straighten egocentric misconceptions about the good. This might be significant both existentially and for the moral perception. These experiences could

be seen as glimpses about the good. Thus, psychedelics might sometimes give directing glimpses about what to value, and work as a potent source of proleptic rationality, that is, giving reasons for aspiration to develop oneself into certain directions perceived as valuable (cf. Callard 2018). It is notoriously difficult to rationally argue why certain intrinsic values, for instance the inherent value of nature or the value of beauty, should be valued for non-instrumental reasons. The intrinsic values have to be personally and experientially understood, and psychedelics might be especially helpful for generating this kind of axiological insights.

To conclude the discussion, in this chapter I have described the phenomenon of unselfing and perspectival widening with close ties to evaluative changes and perception of intrinsic values in some psychedelic experiences. These empirical descriptions help us to understand the changes of values resulting from psychedelic experimentation not as arbitrary or autonomy-threatening, but as meaningful epistemological processes. These experiences have also significant implications for discussion of psychedelic moral neuroenhancement. The perception of inherent values and alignment with them provides a reason to believe some psychedelic experiences are morally enhancing. Perception of inherent values are plausibly related to many observed effects such as increased prosocial behavior and changed attitudes to nature. The perspectival widening and increased ability to listen to the context which allows one to more flexibly situate oneself to one's environment is morally valuable in itself. On top of this the ability to see the relevance and value of things from the viewpoint of these different possible contexts and framings, especially in a non-egocentric fashion, clearly fulfill the conditions of agential moral neuroenhancement laid out by Earp et al. (2017).

5.3 Philosophical Questions and Criticisms Concerning Perspectival Changes

Thus, we have examined the unselfing and moral perception in respect to psychedelics. During the types of psychedelic experiences discussed above people go through processes of both perspectival widening related to salience and emotional reflective processes, which result in change of their valuations. The framework to understand these is based on thinking of Murdoch and Maslow. I identified the meta-ethical positions both of these thinkers endorsed as immanent value realism in chapter 4. In this view values are patterns of reality, and they are better perceived during these experiences, as they might enhance the capacity

to moral perception. As noted also in chapter 4, the immanent value realism is just one possible meta-ethical position to understand these changes. As was hinted above, more transcendental, platonic versions of value-realism positing a supra-sensory reality might also be evoked (cf. Huxley 1954; Shanon 2002). On the other hand, more constructionist and pluralist positions concerning value are possible, as explored in 4.4. Whether these patterns of values result from perception of real intersubjective values or are subjective or culture-bound is open to philosophical debate. Although there are the interesting commonalities between reports in the direction of these changes which beg for explanation, whether the explanation takes the form of positing the values as part of the structure of reality or as the in-built tendencies of human cognition in an otherwise valueless universe.

As discussed in chapter 4, a weak form of moral perception – that values somehow figure in the overall phenomenal experience – is enough for the argument. It might be asked why any kind moral perception is required. Perhaps there are other ways to account for the changes than resorting to perception in the strict sense. For my argument more important than the stressing of perception *per se* are the aspects Murdoch stresses in her variety of moral perception, namely the relevance of inner change and the perspectival and evaluative effects the reduction of egocentricity can have on our perception and cognition. However, it also seems natural to use the term perception, since psychedelic experiences involve radical perceptual changes, which at least occur seamlessly integrated with the shifts in perspective: the changes in perspective are not only intellectual changes, but holistic changes that affect all embodied, perceptual and cognitive aspects and involve changes in deep schemas and cognitive models which structure our perception (Winkelman 2001; Carhart-Harris & Friston 2019).

Certain counter arguments might be raised against the claims that psychedelics could work as tools for augmenting moral perception. I discuss first epistemic issues centered around the risk of misperception of values. Secondly, I answer to the criticism raised by Lavazza (2017): the claims that psychedelic might pose a threat to autonomy by changing the values too abruptly and that psychedelics entail an antirealist conception of well-being.

5.3.1 Epistemological Concerns

Criticism that might be raised is whether psychedelics may lead to outright misperception of values. Could psychedelics sometimes lead to non-rational change of moral concepts and

values, or even to outright moral delusions? Are psychedelic experiences on good enough epistemological ground for reliable moral perception to occur?

It should be admitted that perceptions and interpretations that are not tuned with reality and that are epistemically dubious can occur during psychedelic experiences (Shanon 2002, 245; Carhart-Harris & Friston 2019, 335). The claim is not that all perceptions let alone interpretations in psychedelic states are accurate: the epistemological profile of psychedelic experiences is complex.⁶¹ The perspectives gained have to be tested and scrutinized after the psychedelic experience. One important caveat and a concession to critics is that the experience might hold certain risk if one has not developed rational and critical faculties of the mind. Some phenomena experienced in psychedelic states are genuinely puzzling.⁶² The problematic issue is, as Shanon (2002, 245) has pointed out, psychedelics in some cases might lead to ‘infelicitous meaningfulness’, that is, making unfounded and faulty epistemic conclusions based on a sense of enhanced meaningfulness and non-ordinary experiences. Some risks associated with psychedelic experiences might come from the situation that they are embedded in a non-sophisticated epistemic context that gives too much epistemic value to all psychedelic experiences without adequate discrimination, and even valorizes certain weird experiences. Jumping from experiences that are enhanced with high degree of meaningfulness to far-fetched epistemological conclusions too hasty might be prevented by cultivating certain epistemic skills and virtues. To minimize these risks psychedelic experiences should be embedded in a wider framework of rationality and fallibility about our conceptions and perception, to prevent unjustified epistemic leaps or conclusions drawn from these experiences. Practically perhaps some kind of epistemological psychoeducation could be given to people before letting them embark on their psychedelic journeys.

⁶¹ The point is not that all perceptions under psychedelics become more accurate. Instead, the habitual ways that the cognitive system has accustomed to phrase and frame perception might weaken, and this leads to attempts to re-stabilize the cognitive system and give coherent meaning and interpretation to the more chaotic and less organized perception that unfolds (Carhart-Harris & Friston 2019; Pink-Hashkes et al. 2017). This might also lead to visual hallucinations, but it is precisely this chaoticness that might increase the need to really look and try to make sense about what is happening. The increased attention given to reality in an attempt to make sense of the experience is one factor that reveals the new perceptions, some of which plausibly are more accurate than previous.

⁶² Good examples about these puzzling phenomena are synchronicity and syntony, that is, respectively, improbable co-occurrence of two events that cannot be explained in normal causal fashion and co-ordinated occurrence of two seemingly unrelated events (Shanon 2002, 245). It is thus not surprising that magical thinking and similar traits can be enhanced by psychedelics (Carhart-Harris & Friston 2019, 335).

Similarly, psychedelics users might benefit from the kind of attention Murdoch is talking about. She saw that attention with an intention to perceive honestly and clearly is an important prerequisite for morality. Psychedelic might sometimes enhance this kind of attention, but it very well might be that mature psychedelic use also requires this kind of attention and should be combined with practices that cultivate this kind of attention and other epistemic virtues. Of course the matter is far from simple, but the lack of this kind of attention or intention might be one factor why in some unfortunate cases psychedelic use seems to contribute to egocentric fantasy or forming of ill-founded, illusory beliefs.⁶³ Set and setting and the prior character of the person are relevant, as is the right kind of intention.

One possible criticism is to adopt the attitude of fundamental epistemic scepticism towards altered states of consciousness and psychedelic experiences in general. If they are in general untrustworthy sources of knowledge, or are epistemically detrimental, the possibility of gaining accurate perception of values would be seriously undermined. The philosophical evaluation of the epistemic questions of psychedelic experiences is clearly a work in progress, and answers to many epistemic questions have their bearings also on the worth of psychedelics as tools of moral neuroenhancement. In the discussion so far Jennifer Windt (2011), Roche (2010) and Lavazza (2017) have criticised the epistemic trustworthiness of these states. Letheby (2019) has replied to many of these criticisms, many of which rest on outright misconceptions and unsophisticated conceptions of altered states of consciousness.

In general, there are at least two ways to answer the epistemic skepticism towards psychedelic states. One is to claim that the accusation of overall distrust to all and every possible epistemic merit psychedelics might have is simply unfounded. Psychedelic experiences presumably have both epistemic costs and benefits, but they might also be epistemically innocent as in spite of the costs they can lead to epistemic benefits not otherwise available, as Letheby (2016) has argued. As Letheby also points out, often people after the experience report sound and plausible insights that they have gained, and a general feel of learning from these experiences which gives *prima facie* reason to assume that psychedelics are epistemically useful. In an earlier paper Letheby argues also for three kinds

⁶³ For example, the infelicitous meaningfulness Shanon discusses seems to be especially vicious if one is in strongly egocentric states. The anecdotally observed 'claridad'-phenomena of developing more or less delusional levels of fantasies of grandeur about oneself often seems to be linked to interpreting various observed synchronicities and other correlational patterns happening in altered states as somehow referring to oneself, and signifying something about oneself rather than about the inexhaustibility of the cosmos.

of knowledge gained: knowledge about one's psychological potential, knowledge about the nature of the self, and modal knowledge in cases where the sense of possible courses of actions has narrowed down (Letheby 2015, 36–39). The other main point Letheby (2019) makes is that the knowledge gained from these experiences are not new facts, but more something like deeper understanding about facts that one knew beforehand. Also, Shanon (2010) has argued for different kinds of knowledge and learning psychedelic experiences can give. Thus, one should not in an indiscriminate manner reject all possible knowledge psychedelic experiences can give.

The main argument of this work rests on the premise that – although some perceptions, interpretations and even beliefs people are prone to form in psychedelic states might be unfounded – we have reasons to suppose that psychedelics can at least reasonably often change the perspectives in a way that is not illusory. Although we can imagine a situation where a person has an illusion of being in a wider perspective (perhaps a vague impression of an insight and a 'feel' that later does not translate to any concrete), I think this is not plausible in respect to many psychedelic experiences discussed above. One cannot be mistaken for example about the fact that he feeling strong awe or sense of connection to everything around him in the same way one can be mistaken about the veracity of some specific piece of factual information someone claims to have gotten in a psychedelic state: the subject in a sense is the highest epistemic authority concerning her perspective and sense of participation with the world. Especially if undoing the egocentric perspective is inverse cognitive penetration or unfabrication of certain constructed mental structures, as I argued in chapter 4, the perspectives unselfing generates are even less likely illusions. However, these epistemic dimensions involved in the shift in perspective to a less egocentric should be further explored.

According to my argument, the better discernment of intrinsic values would be yet a separate class of knowledge psychedelics can give. The epistemic dimensions of the perception of values seems to be related to, but not be reduced to the knowledge Letheby argues for. Maybe axiological knowledge is a *sui generis* category of knowledge psychedelics can yield, especially if values are not conceived to be subjective psychological properties but in a realist fashion wide patterns or properties of reality. Knowledge about values would be then a kind of knowledge about how the multitude of disparate entities and things of reality hang together, and how one should orient to this whole. Further, this kind of axiological knowledge would not be abstract and propositional but more likely perspectival

and participatory kind of knowledge, knowledge about how the reality looks like from a non-egocentric evaluative perspective (cf. Letheby 2019).

The second way to respond to the concern about epistemic trustworthiness of psychedelic experiences and the possible misperception of values is to take a pragmatic approach. There are multiple reports of psychedelic experiences which describe how they have led to good directions in life, at least in the right set and setting. Thus, even if this would be based on epistemological mistakes, they have pragmatic worth that might outweigh these epistemic problems. Relatedly, Owen Flanagan (2017; with Graham 2017) has written about 'positive metaphysical hallucinations', defined as "a kind of conscious mental state that involves an 'altered state' which is existentially meaningful, morally motivating and also likely to be false; or, if not false, not supported by any other evidence than that the hallucinatory experience seems self-certifying, or beautiful or good" (Flanagan 2017, 335). As an example, Flanagan uses the perception of love as the foundation of reality. His point is that these certain metaphysical realizations and ensuing beliefs induced by spiritual practise or psychedelics should not be analyzed primarily from the viewpoint of beliefs or propositional truth. Instead, Flanagan conceives these as platforms for living a good life. The point is that whether these beliefs are true in any objective or strict sense, they can still be important spirit-constituting and action-guiding springboards for living an excellent life, as also William James (1902) a century ago observed: their consequences for life lived is what matters (Flanagan 2017, 346; Flanagan & Graham 2017, 307–308).⁶⁴ Thus, to sceptics of both the epistemic value of psychedelic experience and of value realism, from a pragmatic point of view we could answer that even imagined values might be positive 'metaphysical hallucinations' which are cognitively penetrated to the experience and can afford living a good life. If these afford such benefits for example in prosocial behavior, opening of the perspective and attention to the interests of others, tuning into one's own nature or respecting nature they are pragmatically useful, even though the reason would not be a

⁶⁴ To take an example that underlines this point of moral relevance of some presumably not-so-robust perceptions, Shanon reports: "In particular, many drinkers report that Ayahuasca made them appreciate the reason we human beings are here on this planet. The most common reason indicated is for people to correct errors they had made in previous incarnations and to contribute to the overall welfare of the world." (Shanon 2002, 174–175). Even from a sceptical viewpoint we might agree that this kind of effort to correct the postulated errors done in postulated previous incarnations can lead to practically good outcomes in living a virtuous life, as well as lead to a widened temporal perspective on life. Similarly some of the perception of values, such as vision Shanon reports, where he felt he had encountered the Supreme Good (Shanon 2002, 174), are also somewhat "far-out", and a person less inclined to platonism might understand these through the lenses of metaphysical hallucinations Flanagan is offering.

more accurate perception of values. A middle ground would be to think that some perceptions in psychedelic states are valuable because they are both true and useful, and some perceptions might be valuable because they are pragmatically useful metaphysical hallucinations.

Further, psychedelic experiences – whether they are ‘metaphysical hallucinations’ or veridical – might be epistemically and pragmatically useful if they make us more deeply understand certain values that we otherwise understand in a shallower way. Psychedelics might enhance the interconnectedness and intertwinedness between thought processes, imagination, emotion and motivation (Shanon 2002, 335–337; Winkelman 2001).⁶⁵ As suggested by recent work done in the epistemic analysis of psychedelic states, not the information but the mode of apprehension of the information might be the special aspect of psychedelic experiences (Letheby 2019, Shanon 2010). Thus, the perception of values in psychedelic experiences could enable us to connect to our values in an experiential way and have a fuller understanding of them. This could also give our valuations a motivational force that purely conceptual or intellectual entertaining of values lacks, if a) the perception of values is thus more able than usual to re-tune the motivational and emotional centers of the human psyche, and if b) the perceptual, emotional and motivational aspects of our being can better tune with the propositional and ideational content related to morality. Perhaps propositional moral beliefs or abstract conceptions about values can be apprehended in a way that might deepen the motivational and emotional involvement with these beliefs and propositions.

5.3.2 Autonomy, Authenticity and Antirealism

The other strand of criticism I want to discuss is the claim that psychedelics might undermine the autonomy of the person, a worry that Lavazza (2017, 245–247) has raised. His point is that the associated changes in personality, values and desires are so fast that they do not involve required rational deliberation and thus cannot be authentic. Lavazza seems to be making an ill-founded implication that the quickness of changes implies that processes of deliberation are somehow shut off, or that long-term deliberation is always required for a change to be rational. Short-circuiting of deliberation seems not to be the case, as

⁶⁵ This might be correlated with the observations about the increased bottom-up information and with the finding that psychedelics increase entropic and ‘anarchic’ neural dynamics in the brain and make areas of the brain to communicate that usually communicate less with each other (Carhart-Harris & Friston 2019).

psychedelic phenomenology exhibits people retaining their power of intellect for most part of the experience, and even going through meaningful inferential and rational processes during the experience (Letheby 2015, 176–186; Shanon 2002, 160-180). Psychedelic experiences can feel like an immense amount of experience and thinking is condensed to a very short duration of clock time (for changes in the experience of time, see Shanon 2002, 226–241). It is possible that that huge amount of information processing could happen in a short duration of time.

In addition to this, the possible changes in values and beliefs are not imposed on the individual, but the reflective processes after the trip, so called integration phase, plays a significant role for what kind of implications and inferences are drawn from the experience. Although psychedelic experience might be very convincing, sometimes seem more real than reality, and lead to re-evaluation of values and fundamental metaphysical assumptions, they do not seem to bypass rational deliberation, if one has the capacity to begin with, nor impose certain views and beliefs on the user. Some individuals are not convinced or compelled by experiences that convince others (cf. Shanon 2002, 238–256). On the contrary to the claims made by Lavazza, Ballesteros (2019, 751–752) has even suggested that psychedelics respect autonomy well compared to other possible forms of interventions of moral enhancement, because psychedelic moral enhancement has many elements that lessen the threat, such as the influence of set and setting and the personal integration after the experience. Since drugs are only partially responsible for the outcome the psychedelic improvement of morality would not be deterministic, but mediated by reasoning and self-reflection, as Ballesteros (2019, 741–742) points out. Psychedelics seem rather to facilitate than to determine changes, and the changes occur because of meaningful psychological processes. Thus, even if psychedelics are not as reliable or robust a way to change a person to a certain direction as some other possible form of moral enhancement, they might evade some problems that arise around self-determination and authenticity. Psychedelics do not seem to pose a significant threat to autonomy.

Another worry Lavazza (2017, 248–251) raises is that psychedelic as they enhance subjective sense of well-being and sense of meaningfulness support internalist or antirealist notion of well-being – that well-being is essentially caused by internal factors such as attitudes, mind-states and biochemical states of the brain. Lavazza contrasts this with an externalist and realist notion of well-being which stresses real external conditions, such as material conditions of well-being, for example the ‘primary goods’ of John Rawls (1971). We could reply that this worry is also exaggerated: it is not surprising that internal factors

contributing to well-being are stressed in processes like psychedelic trips. Our attitudes and framings we have of reality incontestably affect our well-being, and it is valuable to find tools to affect that side of the equation. However, this does not in itself imply a devaluation of the external conditions for well-being: internal and external conditions are not in an either-or relationship. Further, the motivation for using psychedelics often definitely is not to escape from reality. As Murdoch claims, inner change can be of paramount importance for developing our conceptions towards objectivity and reality-boundedness. Many cognitive processes and insights during psychedelics states show a strong, even enhanced cognitive coupling with the external world. This is evident in many cases of change of values explored above: these are not changes occurring purely inside the subject but are more about the relationship between the subject and her world.

Although from a bit of a different angle the worry about internalism is well taken. Many issues psychedelics can help with – like mental health issues and lack of sense of meaning in life – are also contributed by complex social factors such as cultural dislocation, erosion of communal values, high demands placed on us by late-capitalist society and poverty. There is a risk of individualizing, reducing and psychologizing these phenomena when for example psychedelics, SSRI's or meditation are offered as antidotes to a sense of disconnection, meaninglessness et cetera. Only individual enhancement of awe and well-being will not solve social problems – such might even be considered as a quite dystopian scenario of collective spiritual bypassing in the vein of Huxley's (1932) novel *Brave New World*. Psychedelic should be used in the context of a wider set of responses to the meaning crisis and societal problems we are facing. Psychedelics alone cannot make system change, even if they perhaps could work as one spicy ingredient (cf. Eisenstein 2016). I have discussed the change of values mainly on an individual level, although values are greatly conditioned by culture, and related to complex cultural dynamics. These wider social dimensions of the value change – for example the potential of unselfing to help to pierce through cultural conceptions (cf. Huxley 1999, 247–256) – should be further explored.

Following from this discussion psychedelics seem to be a quite safe option for moral enhancement in the right environment. They mostly fulfill the three criteria laid out in Earp et al. (2017, 173) for permissible moral neuroenhancement. The first criteria is that moral neuroenhancement should play an adjunctive role for traditional moral learning. This condition is easy to fulfill, if psychedelics are used in a meaning-rich context. In the light of my argument this psychedelic moral enhancement might also be enhanced by embedding it in a context that involves other more-traditional techniques for unselfing, such as engaging

with works of art or music, meditative practice, philosophizing et cetera.⁶⁶ Second condition, that the drug or technology allows conscious reflection and critical engagement with moral insights that it might facilitate, is also fulfilled by psychedelics, as argued above. Obviously, it would be problematic if changes in beliefs or perceptions adapted in psychedelic states would stick in a delusion-like manner and be impervious to reflection. As we saw, this rarely is the case.⁶⁷ The third condition, that the drug or technology would be “thoroughly researched, with a detailed benefit-to-risk profile, and is administered under conditions of valid consent” is partly problematic (Earp et al. 2017, 173). Valid consent is of course easily granted, but the detailed benefit-to-risk profile is, although not totally lacking, not obviously clear.⁶⁸

To sum this section up, psychedelic experiences have a complex epistemic profile that we are just beginning to understand. All perceptions and interpretations done in psychedelics states are not accurate nor veridical, although these experiences can arguably give some epistemic benefits and kinds of knowledge. Based on the argument developed in this thesis, the axiological knowledge of intrinsic values can be conceived as one further category of knowledge psychedelic experiences can plausibly give, although these

⁶⁶ Something like this is often happening: the setting of psychedelic trips almost always involves music, often also nature, and sometimes ritual arrangements that contribute greatly to the unselfing power of the experience. Also, in some ayahuasca churches practices similar to mindfulness meditation are already employed (Shanon 2002, 298). Recently Griffith et al (2018) conducted a research where they examined how receiving simultaneous support for spiritual practice affected on psilocybin experience and concluded that receiving support increased the frequency and significance of mystical experiences subjects had, and the positive effects observed after the experience.

⁶⁷ Although it should be noted that there are some anecdotal cases, and sometimes people might adopt delusional-like certainty in things encountered during psychedelic trips – but this is more of an exception than a rule. Quite often convincing experiences that have a great face value of being real can baffle and lead to processes of change of worldviews, but these do not happen arbitrarily or without reflection.

⁶⁸ It can be argued that psychedelics defy the whole idea of simple risk-benefit -calculation, since the risks involved are so vague and complex. First, psychedelics involve low-probability but high-impact risks and occurrences – black swans, to borrow the term of Nassim Nicholas Taleb (2007) – which are by their nature difficult to predict, such as rare psychotic episodes in predisposed individuals. Further, the whole idea of an exact risk-benefit profile faces great difficulties: what is counted as risk and what is counted as benefit is partially an evaluative question. If our values and answers to these evaluative questions can change as we go through transformative experiences, the whole risk-benefit calculation collapses. To take an example, for an atheist adopting a spiritual worldview and committing himself to wholly another set of values as a result of psychedelic-induced conversion might be a grave risk. However, for a person who has undergone such a conversion the event might be evaluated as just what needed to happen. The probability of transformative changes that psychedelics can induce in a *particular case* (although the general frequency can be empirically surveyed), their exact nature, their consequences and the value of these changes and consequences are all next to impossible to predict beforehand.

epistemic dimensions of the argument deserve more attention. On the other hand, the risks that Lavazza (2017) raised about autonomy, authenticity and antirealism were found to be exaggerated. Psychedelics in general are not likely to pose a threat to autonomy, nor do they necessarily entail antirealism about well-being.

6 Conclusions

6.1 Summary

The main conclusion from this thesis is that at least some changes in values associated with psychedelic experiences are plausibly related to these evaluative changes brought by the process of unselfing and experiences of self-transcendence psychedelics induce. In some psychedelic experiences there occurs a shift one to a less egocentric perspective. These experiences can thus make one evaluate the world less from the perspective of egocentric instrumental utility and open one up to the world and its intrinsic values – such as beauty, goodness, truth and the inherent value of nature. Thus, the changes in values following from these kinds of experiences are not arbitrary, but a result of a meaningful epistemological albeit non-propositional process.

To consider issues internal to the framework developed in chapters 3 and 4, it is plausible that experiences of self-transcendence, such psychedelics are known to induce, would foster the phenomena of unselfing. I argued that in the process of unselfing our evaluative perspective and contexts can widen to allocentric and cosmocentric perspectives, and the amount of loving attention directed toward the world and others can increase. A host of supporting and converging material was explored, ranging from general conceptual work on the sense of self to Murdoch's thoughts about unselfing and to empirical work on self-transcendence.

Similarly, it is plausible, as argued in chapter 4, that moral perception (if this is granted) and the general ability to grasp intrinsic values as part of one's overall phenomenal experience would be enhanced by the process of unselfing. Our values and moral perceptions are in a relation to the evaluative perspective of the subject which becomes less egocentrically instrumental in the process of unselfing. Especially interesting is that peak-experiences – which psychedelics also cause – can lead to the perception of B-values, as Maslow claims. Further I argued that the process of unselfing can be considered as a form of inverse moral perception where the penetration of our experience by egocentric narratives

and attributions of salience weakens, and this might be a prominent reason why intrinsic values are better perceived in states of self-transcendence.

The discussion of psychedelic experiences through the lenses of unselfing and moral perception yielded many insightful connections. The concepts of unselfing and moral perception can help us to make sense of psychedelic experiences and tie together many phenomena encountered. Decreased valuation of superficial pursuits, recognition of one's deep held values, and calibrating the inner compass in accord with these values sometimes forgotten, perception of intrinsic values novel for the subject, and certain ethical, social and ecological dimensions of psychedelic experiences can all be well accommodated into this framework and understood in relation to unselfing and moral perception. Further by the conceptual tools of unselfing and moral perception the long-term effects on personality and values and behavior psychedelic experience induce can be connected to the transformative experiences. Peak-experiences, ego-dissolutions and mystical-type experiences are states where the evaluative perspective is maximally altered, but also less radical psychedelic experiences can change the evaluation and attributions of salience to less egocentric. These different experiences can leave some residual changes in perspective and cognitive maps afterwards. According to numerous anecdotal reports, sometimes psychedelic experiences can work as glimpses to valuable ways of perceiving the world which have aspirational power to direct one's behavior after the experience. Of course, more detailed empirical work is required to establish the causal connections and detail of the specific change psychedelics and experiences of self-transcendence in general are prone to induce. But the tentative findings about the changes in values associated with psychedelic experiences would fit very well with the framework developed in this thesis.

Some possible objections to the framework were discussed. It would be foolish to place too great expectations on psychedelic experiences, as they most probably enhance flourishing life and morality in an already meaning-rich context augmented with other techniques and factors that can foster the unselfing and moral perception, such as meditative discipline. The general epistemic distrust towards psychedelic states was dismissed as exaggerated, although discrimination is required to separate the wheat from the chaff. Psychedelics are not epistemically unproblematic, but they may well be epistemically innocent, as despite their epistemic shortcomings they can confer genuine epistemic benefits not otherwise available for the subject, as Letheby argues (2016). The axiological knowledge might be a hitherto unexamined form of knowledge psychedelic

experiences can impart, especially if value realism is granted. I also argued that psychedelics do not pose a serious threat to autonomy or authenticity of the subject.

I have explored various philosophical and meta-ethical positions to understand these changes in perception of values, although more work is required to more comprehensively evaluate the merits and demerits of each position. The value realism espoused by Maslow and Murdoch from an immanent perspective, or even a more Platonic form of value realism as discussed by Huxley and Shanon are options that can accommodate and make sense of the evaluative changes examined above. As noted, other meta-ethical positions are also possibilities for understanding the changes in values and the (apparent) perception of values. Unselfing and moral perception do not necessarily require value realism, although it is a viable alternative to understand these phenomena. The work to explicate these different philosophical positions and to set them in polemic in respect to each other is left for later occasion.

6.2 General Discussion

Finally, I want to discuss the merits, the lacks and wider implications this thesis has. To consider the relevance of the framework I developed, it makes a significant contribution to current discussions on moral neuroenhancement by presenting a plausible and well-elaborated connection between the experiences of self-transcendence and the change of valuations and values, which is not limited to only psychedelic experiences. Another original contribution is that the works of Iris Murdoch and Abraham Maslow are connected to the discussion of psychedelic experiences and moral neuroenhancement.

There are two general theoretical merits my framework has. First, there is a strong convergence between various strands of research, such as neuroscientific research and cognitive theories (Carhart-Harris et al. 2014; Carhart-Harris & Friston 2019; Vervaeke & Ferraro 2013), the lines of thinking in various contemplative traditions and in modern philosophy and cognitive science (Albahari 2006; Hadot 2004; Burbea 2014; Vervaeke & Ferraro 2013), and between recent empirical findings concerning psychedelics. There is a lot of material from all these aforementioned fields that, I believe, could be connected and used in different ways to support and enrich the argument above. For example, I have been referring to the theory that psychedelics disrupt top-down models or constructs, and subsequently to increase the bottom-up information from senses and from emotional centers of the brain (Carhart-Harris & Friston 2019). There is already existing discussion on using predictive processing paradigm with psychedelics, and this paradigm has interesting

similarities to philosophy of Murdoch (cf. Carhart-Harris & Friston 2019; Carhart-Harris 2018b; Swanson 2018; Pink-Hashkes et al. 2017; Hohwy 2013; Clark 2016). These themes could be combined into existing literature on moral perception to more fully understand the change I explored. It is probable that the process of unselfing is at least in psychedelic states accompanied with a general disruption of top-down constructs that feeds into the purported increase in the ability to find novel perceptual configurations and patterns, including moral configurations and patterns of value.

As another general theoretic merit, the framework has a high integrative or unifying capacity. By singling out one aspect of these experiences, the framework developed here is one way to grasp the positive effects of mystical experiences, ego-dissolutions et cetera on the evaluative and perspectival aspects of our sense of self and on our values. Further, the changes in evaluative egocentricity could be one unifying factor which ties together not only the mystical experiences and ego-dissolutions, but also a host of perspectival, therapeutic, spiritual and ethical themes observed in psychedelic experiences. Similarly, the changes in values and many perspectival changes – increased sense of connection, aesthetic dimensions, experiences of wonder and awe – and even creativity and increases in openness to some extent could be understood through this framework. The unselfing dynamics explored in this work is one parsimonious way to understand these various changes.

On top of conceptual unification, the framework developed above contributes to understanding the psychological dynamics of ego-dissolutions and mystical experiences and possible therapeutic effects in general (Griffiths et al. 2006 & 2008; Dakwar 2014; Majic et al. 2015). So far mystical experiences and ego-dissolutions have mostly been treated through feature-lists of psychological questionnaires, without shedding light on their functional dynamism, although some detailed philosophical work has been done on ego-dissolutions (Millière 2017; Millière et al. 2018). Even if these experiences are ineffable and difficult to grasp, they do not have to be black boxes to such extent they still are. The reduction of evaluative egocentrism plausibly is one observable dynamic happening in these states. As a possible avenue of future work, it would be interesting to operationalize the evaluative egocentrism, unselfing and perception of values and study them by psychological approach, to test for example how frequent phenomena they are, and test would they hold water in the task of unifying different aspects and effects of psychedelic experiences – that, would they correlate with various other phenomena such as ego-dissolutions, mystical

experiences et cetera. Many testable hypotheses could be generated from the framework developed in this thesis.

Similarly, the main argument of this work supports the observation that in the psychedelics experience there is a remarkable convergence of the therapeutic, the spiritual and the ethical dimensions. The unison of the therapeutic, spiritual and ethical changes raises the need for an integrative framework to unify our understanding about psychedelics.⁶⁹ This need is both theoretical and practical. On the other hand, such a framework for understanding therapeutic, eudaimonic and spiritual changes as coherently related would be a clear intellectual attainment. Also, practically it would be beneficial to have a framework in which psychedelic use in the modern age could be embedded without reducing it only to therapy for mentally ill nor to other-worldly spiritual pursuit. A balanced and comprehensive framework, intellectually honest and robust but still respectful of the phenomenological variety of experiences these substances can impart could practically help with the meaning-making necessarily associated with the use of psychedelics. Further such a framework could integrate other commensurable practices together and integrate them to an overall ecology of practices and understanding. The themes explored in this thesis could well contribute for such a wider integrative framework.

Further, the theme of unselfing is a robust common factor that can be used to understand not only psychedelics, but other various practices that involve inner change. The framework of unselfing and moral perception can be used to understand the effects of various experiences and practices related to altered states of consciousness, spirituality and to eudaimonia, such as contemplative practices. Also, the framework supports the notion that experiences of self-transcendence can be a valuable part of virtue-ethical or eudaimonic pursuits in general, as these experiences can make us pay more attention to the world and let us see through the constructed egocentric salience into intrinsic values. Psychedelic experiences are not the only phenomena that these concepts and dynamics of unselfing and perception of values can shed light on.

⁶⁹ The coalesce between ethics and eudaimonia, between perceiving good, acting in accord what is good and being psychologically well was a clearly thematized for example in philosophical schools of antiquity (Hadot 1995; 2004) or in buddhist tradition (Albahari 2006), and also more recently in humanistic and positive psychology: for example Maslow saw an intimate connection between self-actualization and self-transcendence, and claimed that increased integration within the self leads to increased integration between the self and the world (Maslow 1971, 158–159). Also, recent work on cognitive science of wisdom (Vervaeke & Ferraro 2013, 2016) goes in this direction. These could be sources to draw from when exploring psychedelics from this angle.

On the other hand, there are aspects of psychedelic experience which cannot be explained by the dynamics of unselfing and increased moral perception, some of which might even in a sense not fit very well with the framework. I have not discussed for example certain other-worldly mystical, spiritual and transpersonal effects such as felt encounters with ultimate reality, certain non-ordinary transformations of consciousness or some of the contents of psychedelic vision – antipodes of the mind in terminology of Huxley (1954) (Shanon 2002, 256–272; Master and Houston 1966, 213–313; Fischer 1971; Griffiths et al. 2019). Similarly some “far-out” phenomena such as entity encounter and sense of intelligence inherent in psychedelics, and other aspects of psychedelic experiences which Carhart-Harris and Friston (2019) half-ironically term ‘the woo’ are phenomena the framework developed here does not cover (Strassman 2001; Watts et al 2017, 532; Carhart-Harris & Friston 2019, 335–336).

Thus, considering the change of values, there might be aspects of psychedelic experiences this approach has overlooked. This thesis has centered on this-worldly and horizontal experiences associated with psychedelics. Yet even among these there are aspects such as embodied dimensions of these experiences that have been left untreated. The account offered here should be taken as singling out one important aspect of psychedelic experiences, with a humble recognition of the phenomenological richness of these experiences, which perhaps can never be captured by a single theory or framework. There are unfathomable amounts of different possible altered states and huge variety of experiences, and any one approach cannot touch but some of them.

Also, the question which kind of use of psychedelics might be morally most relevant has to be asked. This study has paid little attention to the differences between different psychedelics, different doses, different phases of experience, different patterns of use and so on. It has been mostly assumed that different classical psychedelics are relatively similar, and thus material concerning different classical psychedelics has been lumped together. Thus, the approach I have adapted might overlook some interesting divergences that further studies might reveal. A more detailed analysis of these differences between various psychedelics may contribute to understanding the details of psychedelic unselfing, and associated effects on moral perception. Also, a more detailed treatment of the phenomenology of various psychedelic experiences and their relative benefits for unselfing and moral perception would shed more light on certain questions. Especially interesting is the thematic of self-transcendent experiences. For example, what is the role of peak-

experiences and mystical experiences versus other effects psychedelics have in the dynamic of unselfing and moral perception? Also, the question of what patterns of use might be optimal for moral enhancement and perception of values has not been discussed.⁷⁰ On top of academic purposes these questions might have their bearing for engineering of the optimal set and setting for use of psychedelics for moral neuroenhancement.

As a general remark it should be reminded that this work has been drawing much from empirical findings on psychedelics. As a disclaimer, many of these findings are tentative and many questions remain open. Studies with larger and less self-selected samples are required to inform us about the generalizability of the framework and reduce the risk of cherry-picking. A clearer and more comprehensive picture about the frequency and the magnitude of the positive effects psychedelic have in this regard will surely emerge as empirical studies accumulate. Until then many plausible reservations remain about drawing too certain conclusions from tentative evidence.

As final points, I want to draw a couple of possible wider implications this work may have. By establishing the existential and moral worth of psychedelic experiences we would have a fairly good reason and justification for their use not only therapy but also in “the betterment of the well people”, and as part of modern secular attempts of eudaimonia and spirituality (cf. Elsey 2017; Masters & Houston 1966, vii-ix; Letheby 2017a). This brings challenges and raises questions concerning the issue of how psychedelics are to be integrated into the western society. The most probable route is as part of the medical profession and psychiatry. If psychedelic experiences have significant ethical and existential dimensions related that could help with living a good life, is it right to delimit their legal use only for people with psychiatric problems? It seems that according to the accumulating evidence the justification

⁷⁰ Presumably sustained, long-term work with psychedelics might be fostering factors for the moral benefits of psychedelic use. Both in therapeutic (Noorani et al 2018, 7–8) and in ritual (Shanon 2002, 299–302) context there are observations that themes of experiences might unfold across many psychedelic sessions, and that the work done between these sessions with the emerging material is often relevant. Shanon claims that the use of ayahuasca – and this easily generalizes to other psychedelics – is often experienced as a school, with teachings and learning accumulating through a period of many sessions (Shanon 2002, 299–303). Also, the nature of experience might change: Shanon notes that experienced users of ayahuasca usually deal less with autobiographical and personal material and encounter more universal themes, perhaps suggesting a process of unselfing that has progressed (Shanon 2002, 299–300). Using psychedelics could also be considered a skill in its own right, as Shanon notes (2010, 272–273; 2002, 301–302). On the other hand, if one habituates to use psychedelics casually, without the supporting setting and intentions, their power to deliver moral enhancement might even weaken over time. This fits with the anecdotal observation that some people use frequent and big amounts of psychedelics as party drugs for example as part of electronic music festivals with little apparent transformative effects.

to restrain their use only to therapeutic purposes is necessarily not warranted, as they might in the right kind of usage have significant potential to enrich the lives of clinically healthy people without substantial individual and societal risks. Further, their availability for controlled use in a well conducted set and setting would minimize many risks, substantial part of which are associated with unsupervised use in suboptimal set and setting. This raises the question about the possible institutions and practices which could integrate their use in the society as wisely as possible. The discussion obviously involves many complex socio-political variables such as balancing risks and benefits on population level and details of legal arrangements.

The restriction of their use to only psychiatric context seems even less warranted if psychedelics may work as an important source for moral neuroenhancement, which has been argued to be a moral imperative at the present age (Ballesteros 2019; Germann 2019; Persson and Savulescu 2008; 2014). The integrity of the biosphere of our planet is threatened by the institutionalized forms of behavior of humans. As Gus Speth, US top advisor on climate change, has famously stated, the top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy, and to deal with these we need a cultural and spiritual transformation, not only a technological solution. Without a change in our societal values and without a revitalization of the currently frozen political imagination the available technological tools will not solve the crises we are facing. We urgently need means that could help us to change the way we are relating to the larger system of living beings. The remarks Masters and Houston made half century ago are still as timely as back then:

We are at a time when existing as well as new and unexplored psychedelics could be providing important understanding and knowledge so urgently needed by our people and our planet. Given the multitude of our problems, how foolish and how tragic it is to deny ourselves such treasures of experience and such vehicles of multifaceted empowerment. And, of course, psychedelics offer experiences of such wonder and beauty that no wise and benevolent society should fail to find ways to make them accessible. (Masters & Houston 1966, ix)

To draw a third possible albeit bold implication, perhaps psychedelics wisely used could by reducing egocentricity enlarge our identity, open up our imagination and sense of possibilities, connect us to deeper, intrinsic values and deepen our motivational and emotional involvement with the world around us. If some psychedelic experiences momentarily help us to bracket the human perspective, to forget the evolutionary moulded overt concern for our daily life and our position in the human community for a moment, these

experiences might make us more able to empathize with life forms more alien and realize their inherent value.⁷¹ These experiences might help us to perceive our immense connectedness and dependence to the larger whole, to deepen our understanding how humans and human societies form an intricate, undivided and interconnected whole with other life forms on this earth.

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⁷¹ Shanon (2010, 268) writes about how ayahuasca can give understanding about nature by the mode of appreciation it gives. The information gained is not necessarily new, but the way it is gained can deepen the relationship to and understanding of nature. Identity transformations and animal metamorphosis experiences might also bring a certain kind of sympathy and even understanding of nature.

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