



Food of the Gods

A Radical History of Plants, Psychedelics and Human Evolution

Terence
McKenna

‘The modern classic on
mind-altering drugs
and hallucinogens’
The Washington Post

Food of the Gods

ALSO BY TERENCE McKENNA

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TRUE HALLUCINATIONS

Food of the Gods

The SEARCH for the ORIGINAL TREE of KNOWLEDGE

A Radical History of
Plants, Psychedelics
and Human Evolution

Terence
McKenna





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*For
Kat
Finn and Klea*

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Time for a Second Helping? Reflections on Terence McKenna's *Food of the Gods*

Introduction

It has been nearly 30 years since my brother Terence McKenna's book, *Food of the Gods*, was published. In the decades since, much has changed in our understanding of the role that psychedelics and other classes of psychoactive drugs have played in the history of human cultures and institutions, and also possibly in human evolution. Much has changed as well in almost every aspect of human society, and the ideas first put forward in *Food of the Gods* about the influence of psychoactive drugs, especially psychedelics, on the historical, cultural and biological career of humanity from prehistory to the present day are more timely than ever. On publication in 1992 the book was touted as a 'radical history of plants, drugs and human evolution.' In light of what we know now, the ideas presented by Terence merit a second and more thoughtful examination. For this reason, I am pleased that Rider Books, an imprint of Penguin Random House UK, has chosen to reprint this book, and has invited me to provide a foreword.

Psychedelics and the Emergence of Consciousness

What was most 'radical' of the many ideas in the book is what has been characterized (and largely denounced, while being

misrepresented) in the mainstream media as the ‘Stoned Ape’ theory. This is the notion that accidental, and later deliberate, ingestion of psilocybin mushrooms by foraging hominids, perhaps as long as two million years ago, may have profoundly affected the emergence of consciousness in early humans. They may possibly have contributed to the explosive expansion in the size and complexity of the human brain over that span of time – one of the chief conundrums faced by evolutionary biologists attempting to explain the many anomalies that render the human species so drastically different from any other members of the primate family. The very notion invites ridicule and derision, especially by those uncomfortable with the notion that ‘drugs,’ and prohibited and dangerous drugs at that, could have played any role as evolutionary catalysts of consciousness.

A more thoughtful consideration of this proposal suggests that it is not such a far-fetched speculation, particularly when viewed in the light of discoveries that have been made in the decades since its publication. Science now has a much more nuanced understanding of evolutionary dynamics, the neurobiology of brain development, and the psychopharmacology of psychedelics, than existed in 1992. These discoveries cast an aura of plausibility on what was, at the time, a radical proposition indeed, because they provide a theoretical foundation for how this might actually have worked. Scientific research on psilocybin and other psychedelics has experienced something of a renaissance in the last two decades after being largely suppressed following the blanket prohibition of psychedelics and their classification as Schedule 1 controlled substances at the end of the 1960s. Schedule 1 is the most restrictive regulatory classification, applying to substances with no known medical applications and high potential for abuse. In most countries this restrictive classification continues, but research has amply demonstrated that in the case of psychedelics this is misapplied. Well-designed

clinical studies have shown that psychedelics, especially psilocybin, show great potential for the treatment of intractable mental disorders for which few effective medications are available. These include major depressive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, and a host of others. Some of the studies have focused on the possible use of psilocybin to treat existential anxiety in patients with terminal illnesses, as a result of its ability to reliably induce profound mystical experiences that can result in persistent life-changing alterations in personal worldviews, including an individual's ability to achieve equanimity in the face of impending death.

While the therapeutic potential of other psychedelics is now being investigated in this new and more receptive research environment, the bulk of the clinical research has been focused on psilocybin. Clinicaltrials.gov is a government website that lists FDA-approved clinical trials for new drugs under investigation for any purpose; it currently lists nearly 50 clinical studies with psilocybin from 2006 to the present. These studies demonstrate that not only is psilocybin safe to use, it is perhaps the ideal clinical psychedelic for treating a variety of mental disorders. It is non-toxic, compatible with human metabolism, has a duration of action that is about the right length for a clinical session, and yet is a profound psychedelic able to induce deeply transformative experiences. In the early research initiated in 2006 by Dr. Roland Griffiths and colleagues at Johns Hopkins University focusing on end of life anxiety, many of the subjects reported that their encounters with psilocybin were the single most personally meaningful experience of their entire lives.

Along with, and in part because of, the clinical investigations, psilocybin has found applications in neuroscience, as a molecular probe for the investigation of the neurobiology of consciousness. In 1992 when *Food of the Gods* was published, two terms that are now commonly used in neuroscience were

rarely encountered in scientific literature: neuroplasticity and epigenetics. Neuroplasticity refers to the ability of the brain to undergo biological changes ranging from biochemical changes at the cellular level of individual neurons to large-scale cortical remapping. Neuroplastic responses were once thought to apply only in the immature, developing brain, but research has now shown that neuroplasticity, including changes in the connectivity of neuronal populations, can persist throughout adulthood. Moreover, neuroplastic changes can occur in response to external events, such as sociocultural conditioning influences, medications, and psychological experiences such as meditation, stress, trauma and learning. Depending on the nature of the external stimulus, these changes may be adverse, but in other cases neuroplastic changes can increase connectivity that may enhance cognitive functioning, increase adaptive response to stress, improve mood, relieve anxiety, and stimulate ideation, among other actions. An increasing body of research demonstrates that the neuroplastic structural and functional reorganization inducible by psilocybin is associated with long-term and persistent beneficial effects, such as positive mood, increased spirituality and enhanced social functioning.

The term epigenetics was rare in scientific literature prior to 1990 but is now the subject of intense research in a broad range of biological studies. Epigenetics refers to heritable changes that do not involve changes in the DNA sequence. Epigenetic processes usually involve modulations in gene expression that result in phenotypic changes that do not result from mutations. Epigenetic changes can arise from developmental processes but may result from external factors such as drugs, environmental chemicals, aging and diet. Maladaptive epigenetic changes in the brain have been associated with early childhood stress, and syndromes such as anxiety, depression, addiction and fear conditioning are reflected in long-term changes in phenotypic traits such as neuronal connection and alterations in brain

structures. Moreover, it has been shown that epigenetic changes can be transgenerational, adding epigenetic mechanisms to the multigenerational transmission of heritable traits, independent of the conventional mechanisms of mutation and natural selection. Interestingly, epigenetic mutation rates can be many orders of magnitude faster than conventional mutations and are also more easily reversible.

The recent research on these two well-established aspects of neurobiology, neuroplasticity and multigenerational transmission of epigenetic traits, provides plausible mechanisms that support Terence's hypothesis. Over the course of millennia, a close co-evolutionary and symbiotic relationship between psilocybin mushrooms and early hominids contributed to rapid increases (in evolutionary terms) in the complexity and size of the human brain, and these neurobiological adaptations are reflected in the enhanced behavioral, cognitive and linguistic capabilities that are characteristic of minded, conscious, neurologically modern humans. Viewed from this perspective, the hypothesis appears not only plausible, but in fact, more than likely.

Consider this scenario: Global climatic changes during the late Pliocene and early Pleistocene (3.6–2.2 million years ago) led to a prolonged period of global cooling, due to depletion of atmospheric carbon dioxide and other factors. These changes were reflected in the disappearance of large tracts of tropical rain forests that were replaced by grasslands and savannahs. Hominid populations transitioning from arboreal habitats to savannah habitats would have encountered ecosystems that received abundant rainfall during cooler seasons and were drier in the warmer months, during which grass fires were frequent. These habitats were also home to populations of large grazing animals such as *Bos primigenius africanus*, a subspecies of the auroch cow, known to inhabit sub-Saharan Africa as long ago as 2.6 million years ago. These grass fires would result in hundreds

of animals perishing as panicked herds were driven into ravines and over cliffs in their frenzied attempts to escape the blazes. As hominids observed this natural phenomenon, they would have had a major incentive to master the use of fire in order to deliberately set grass fires to enhance the hunting and harvesting of these animals. Archeological evidence indicates that hominids mastered the controlled use of fire by 1.7 million years ago, but the use of fire for hunting purposes probably occurred much earlier.

So, two components of a three-way symbiosis were almost certainly present in these grassland biomes from about two million years ago to the end of the Pleistocene (often colloquially referred to as the Ice Age), which is thought to have ended about 12,000 years ago. That populations of hominids and grazing ungulates were simultaneously present in these environments over these timespans is generally accepted by paleontologists and evolutionary biologists. But the third partner in this symbiosis, the tropical psilocybin mushroom, now classified as *Psilocybe cubensis*, has been overlooked or at least not mentioned. Yet, knowing what we know from the current distribution of this mushroom species, it almost certainly was present in these grassland ecosystems during the cool, rainy seasons. *P. cubensis* is a coprophilic species, that is, its preferred substrate is the dung of ungulates such as humpbacked zebu cattle. Its present distribution is pantropical. It can be found during the rainy season in almost any pasture in the warm tropics where cattle graze. Since the cattle provided a rich substrate for its growth, more likely than not, it was present in these grassland ecosystems shared by both hominids and ungulates. And if it was present, as seems certain, then it would certainly have been noticed by foraging and hungry hominids, constantly searching for food. While some mushrooms are diminutive in size, including many *Psilocybe* species, *P. cubensis* can be quite robust: the cap, often up to several inches in diameter,

is golden-colored, sometimes dusted with violet spores from adjacent mushrooms, and is quite easy to spot in a pasture; in fact, it would not be overlooked by any but the most myopic or inattentive of hominids. And once noticed, it would have been consumed. It not only *looks* succulent and delicious – it is. And once consumed, its psychedelic effects would manifest and the first hominid to sample it would quickly realize that this was not just another snack! Thus the symbiotic circle closes. Once established, this symbiotic relationship would have persisted over hundreds of thousands of years, as long as the environmental conditions existed to support it. Over these vast timespans, the interplay between neuroplasticity and epigenetic inheritance would have had plenty of time to affect the evolutionarily rapid changes in neural architecture and complexity that led, in the fullness of time, to the emergence of neurologically modern humans.

As these processes played out over evolutionary timespans, they must have been reflected in something else, never before seen in any species, that emerged as a consequence of this process: culture. While other social species such as bees and ants have a social structure, none have anything resembling human culture. ‘Culture’ is an umbrella term that encompasses the social behavior and norms found in human societies, including knowledge, beliefs, art, laws, customs, capabilities and habits of individuals. Culture is a uniquely human trait, and it arises from, and depends on, language. This is the critical connection to the psychedelic state. Human language originates from inner ideation (which can be understood as another term for imagination). It is *image-ination*, the making of images, the interior representation of something thought or perceived, that is imbued with significance or meaning. The interior content must first be present, but it is language that is the vehicle for the enunciation of its significance, for the articulation of its symbolic power, and it is this process that

mushrooms catalyze, easily and effortlessly. They trigger a flood of interiorized images, but they are associated with meaning and portentousness. Anthropologist Henry Munn speaks eloquently of this process in his wonderful essay ‘The Mushrooms of Language’:^{*}

‘Language is an ecstatic activity of signification. Intoxicated by the mushrooms, the fluency, the ease, the aptness of expression one becomes capable of are such that one is astounded by the words that issue forth from the contact of the intention of articulation with the matter of experience. The spontaneity the mushrooms liberate is not only perceptual, but linguistic. For the shaman, it is as if existence were uttering itself through him.’

In the first chapter of his book, Terence quotes anthropologist Misia Landau:[†]

‘Language is not merely a device for communicating ideas about the world, but rather a tool for bringing the world into existence ... Reality is not simply ‘experienced’ or ‘reflected’ in language, but instead is actually produced by language.’

Terence elaborates on this concept:

‘From the point of view of the psychedelic shaman ... the cosmos is a tale that becomes true as it is

* From ‘The Mushrooms of Language’, Henry Munn, in: *Hallucinogens and Shamanism* (1973) ed. by Michael Harner

† Quoted in Roger Lewin, *In the Age of Mankind* (New York: Smithsonian Institution, 1988, p. 180).

told and as it tells itself. This perspective implies that human imagination can seize the tiller of being in the world ... A reverence for and an immersion in the powers of language ... are the basis of the shamanic path ... Shamanic ecstasy is an act of surrender that authenticates both the individual self and that which it is surrendered to, the mystery of being.'

Terence discusses the role that the mushroom symbiosis played in the development of perceptual skills and in the social dynamics of early humans. He comments on the findings of psychologist Roland Fischer that low doses of psilocybin can enhance visual acuity and thus may have conferred an adaptive advantage on foraging humans, which Terence characterizes as 'chemical binoculars.' In somewhat larger doses, it stimulates restlessness and sexual arousal; this increased copulatory activity would tend to promote community bonding, gene mixing, higher birthrates and a sense of communal responsibility for group offspring. At still higher doses, at the level of shamanic rapture, it would present these communities with the existence of an alternate, transcendent reality that 'is wholly Other and no less mysterious to us than it was to our mushroom-munching ancestors.' It is from that level of ecstatic experience that the figure of the shaman emerges as one who can, through songs and chants, dancing and drumming, create the ritual and noetic context that imparts numinosity and meaning to the collective experience. It is the shaman who can not only share the encounter with the Other but articulate it and interpret it on behalf of the group. It is that role, essential in the most archaic of human societies, in which religion finds its roots.

To my mind, this is the central and most critical component of Terence's 'stoned ape' hypothesis. The abilities of psilocybin mushrooms to stimulate visual acuity and sexual activity were

no doubt important adaptations. But it is its ability to facilitate the creation of a rich interior landscape, an internalized reality populated with visual abstractions expressed via language that are imbued with meaning and significance that is at the heart of its role as a catalyst in the emergence of consciousness in the human species. By fostering this connection between something imagined, an internal abstraction that can be expressed in the external world as a sound or visual representation, psilocybin functioned as a cognitive learning tool. A vocal expression is simply a sound until it signifies something; then it becomes a word, and words are the foundation of language; and language is the means by which our experience of being, by which our reality, comes alive. It is language that enables us to not merely experience reality, but to participate in its creation.

The Expulsion from Eden

In subsequent chapters, Terence speculates on the persistence of the mushroom symbiosis, with its origins buried in the mists of evolutionary time, as pastoral peoples migrated out of Africa about 20,000 years ago, diffusing into the Fertile Crescent and Asia Minor via land bridges at either end of the then-landlocked Red Sea over the next ten to fifteen thousand years. The migrating pastoralists brought with them a cult of cattle and the Great Goddess, the mushrooms tagging along with their bovine hosts, the symbiosis by this time having developed into a matriarchal Ur-religion based on nature worship and shamanic ecstasy. Evidence for this multi-millennial migration can be found in the stunning rock paintings of the Tassili-n-Ajjer Plateau in sub-Saharan Algeria, where some of the earliest rock paintings depict shamans with large numbers of grazing cattle. Some of the figures appear to be dancing, holding fistfuls of mushrooms with mushrooms growing out of their bodies: ‘In one instance they are shown running joyfully, surrounded by

the geometric structures of their hallucinations. The pictorial evidence seems incontrovertible.'

Climate change, along with the penetration of these migratory peoples into hotter, drier regions, may have resulted in the gradual loss or transformation of the mushroom religion as the sacrament became less abundant, and disruptive contacts with other populations contributed to a cultural amnesia that eventually led to the loss or corruption of the primal Ur-religion. In fact, Terence references the oldest myth of the Judeo-Christian religion, the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden, as:

'History's first drug bust ... The story of Genesis is the story of a woman who is mistress of the magical plants. She eats and shares the fruits of the Tree of Life or the Tree of Knowledge, fruits which are "pleasing to the eye and pleasing to contemplate." Note that "the eyes of both of them were opened and they discovered that they were naked." At the metaphorical level, they had attained consciousness of themselves as individuals and of each other as "Other". So the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge gave accurate insights, or perhaps it enhanced their appreciation of sensuality. Whatever the case, this ancient story of our ancestors being cast out of a garden by a spiteful and insecure Jehovah, a storm god, is the story of a Goddess-oriented, partnership society thrown into disequilibrium by successive episodes of draught that affected the carrying capacity and climate of the pastoralists' Saharan Eden. The angel with flashing sword who guards the return to Eden seems an obvious symbol of the unforgiving harshness of the desert sun and the severe drought conditions that accompany it.'

All myths contain a seed of truth. Terence's speculations on the truth behind the story of Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden seem plausible in the context of the prehistory to history transition that he is describing. It is in fact, rather remarkable, and rather odd, that the primary originating myth that is the basis of the Judeo-Christian world view, with its patriarchal, dominator ethos, is linked to the consumption of an obviously psychoactive food that imparts knowledge. Such individual empowerment was not welcome in what Terence terms the 'dominator' cultures. It was not welcome then, and it is not welcome now in repressive societies that place unquestioning obedience and conformance to a dogmatic party line over individual self-discovery and exploration of consciousness.

* * *

Terence's book does not end here. Remnants of the prehistoric Ur-religion persisted into history. Examples can be found in the Çatal Hüyük civilization in Anatolia, and the Eleusinian Mysteries on the Greek mainland, as well as the mysterious Soma, the god-plant-drug of the Indo-Europeans. All of these cults were likely based on the consumption of psychoactive plants or fungi as the central sacrament. As the original psilocybin-based Ur-religion expanded from its geographic origins, the mystery became transformed or forgotten; other psychoactive plants, some not mushrooms or even psychedelics, some not even psychoactive, were substituted due to lack of availability of the mushroom and collective amnesia.

Our species' symbiosis with a psychedelic fungus began on the high plains of the Serengeti in the unimaginable depths of prehistoric time, a primal alliance that launched humankind on its arduous journey from apes to angels. It is a journey we still travel today as we gaze with wonder at the beckoning stars. As with all primal truths, the knowledge erodes over time. Cultural

TIME FOR A SECOND HELPING?

contacts, trade and other exchanges, contamination (or more charitably, cross-fertilization) by other traditions, compounded by migrations and climate change, inevitably results in a proliferation of cults and practices, in which the memory of the original mystery is present as only the faintest echo, if it is present at all. And yet the mushroom remains, still very much with us, available to anyone with the curiosity and courage to explore its worlds of wonder. It remains the original Tree of Knowledge, and we need its wisdom now more than ever.

Dennis McKenna
Abbotsford, British Columbia
July 2020

Introduction: A Manifesto for New Thought about Drugs

A specter is haunting planetary culture—the specter of drugs. The definition of human dignity created by the Renaissance and elaborated into the democratic values of modern Western civilization seems on the point of dissolving. The major media inform us at high volume that the human capacity for obsessional behavior and addiction has made a satanic marriage with modern pharmacology, marketing, and high-speed transportation. Previously obscure forms of chemical use now freely compete in a largely unregulated global marketplace. Whole governments and nations in the Third World are held in thrall by legal and illegal commodities promoting obsessional behavior.

This situation is not new, but it is getting worse. Until quite recently international narcotics cartels were the obedient creations of governments and intelligence agencies that were searching for sources of “invisible” money with which to finance their own brand of institutionalized obsessional behavior.¹ Today, these drug cartels have evolved, through the unprecedented rise in the demand for cocaine, into rogue elephants before whose power even their creators have begun to grow uneasy.²

We are beset by the sad spectacle of “drug wars” waged by governmental institutions that usually are paralyzed by lethargy and inefficiency or are in transparent collusion with the international drug cartels they are publicly pledged to destroy.

No light can penetrate this situation of pandemic drug use and abuse unless we undertake a hard-eyed reappraisal of our present situation and an examination of some old, nearly forgotten, patterns of drug-related experience and behavior. The importance of this task cannot be overestimated. Clearly the self-administration of psychoactive substances, legal and illegal, will be increasingly a part of the future unfolding of global culture.

AN AGONIZING REAPPRAISAL

Any reappraisal of our use of substances must begin with the notion of habit, “a settled tendency or practice.” Familiar, repetitious, and largely unexamined, habits are simply the things that we do. “People,” says an old adage, “are creatures of habit.” Culture is largely a matter of habit, learned from parents and those around us and then slowly modified by shifting conditions and inspired innovations.

Yet, however slow these cultural modifications may seem, when contrasted with the slower-than-glaciers modification of species and ecosystems, culture presents a spectacle of wild and continuous novelty. If nature represents a principle of economy, then culture surely must exemplify the principle of innovation through excess.

When habits consume us, when our devotion to them exceeds the culturally defined norms, we label them as obsessions. We feel, in such situations, as though the uniquely human dimension of free will has somehow been violated. We can become obsessed with almost anything: with a behavior pattern

such as reading the morning paper or with material objects (the collector), land and property (the empire builder), or power over other people (the politician).

While many of us may be collectors, few of us have the opportunity to indulge our obsessions to the point of becoming empire builders or politicians. The obsessions of the ordinary person tend to focus on the here-and-now, on the realm of immediate gratification through sex, food, and drugs. An obsession with the chemical constituents of foods and drugs (also called metabolites) is labeled an addiction.

Addictions and obsessions are unique to human beings. Yes, ample anecdotal evidence supports the existence of a preference for intoxicated states among elephants, chimpanzees, and some butterflies.³ But, as when we contrast the linguistic abilities of chimpanzees and dolphins with human speech, we see that these animal behaviors are enormously different from those of humans.

Habit. Obsession. Addiction. These words are signposts along a path of ever-decreasing free will. Denial of the power of free will is implicit in the notion of addiction, and in our culture, addictions are viewed seriously—especially exotic or unfamiliar addictions. In the nineteenth century the opium addict was the “opium fiend,” a description that harkened back to the idea of a demonic possession by a controlling force from without. In the twentieth century, the addict as a person possessed has been replaced with the notion of addiction as disease. And, with the notion of addiction as disease, the role of free will is finally reduced to the vanishing point. After all, we are not responsible for the diseases that we may inherit or develop.

Today, however, human chemical dependence plays a more conscious role than ever before in the formation and maintenance of cultural values.

Since the middle of the nineteenth century and with ever-greater speed and efficiency, organic chemistry has placed into

the hands of researchers, physicians, and ultimately everyone an endless cornucopia of synthetic drugs. These drugs are more powerful, more effective, of greater duration, and in some cases, many times more addictive than their natural relatives. (An exception is cocaine, which, although a natural product, when refined, concentrated, and injected is particularly destructive.)

The rise of a global information culture has led to the ubiquity of information on the recreational, aphrodisiacal, stimulating, sedative, and psychedelic plants that have been discovered by inquisitive human beings living in remote and previously unconnected parts of the planet. At the same time that this flood of botanical and ethnographic information arrived in Western society, grafting other cultures' habits onto our own and giving us greater choices than ever, great strides were being made in the synthesis of complex organic molecules and in the understanding of the molecular machinery of genes and heredity. These new insights and technologies are contributing to a very different culture of psychopharmacological engineering. Designer drugs such as MDMA, or Ecstasy, and anabolic steroids used by athletes and teenagers to stimulate muscle development are harbingers of an era of ever more frequent and effective pharmacological intervention in how we look, perform, and feel.

The notion of regulating, on a planetary scale, first hundreds and then thousands of easily produced, highly sought after, but illegal synthetic substances is appalling to anyone who hopes for a more open and less regimented future.

AN ARCHAIC REVIVAL

This book will explore the possibility of a revival of the Archaic—or preindustrial and preliterate—attitude toward community, substance use, and nature—an attitude that served our nomadic prehistoric ancestors long and well, before

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the rise of the current cultural style we call “Western.” The Archaic refers to the Upper Paleolithic, a period seven to ten thousand years in the past, immediately preceding the invention and dissemination of agriculture. The Archaic was a time of nomadic pastoralism and partnership, a culture based on cattle-raising, shamanism, and Goddess worship.

I have organized the discussion in a roughly chronological order, with the last and most future-oriented sections taking up and recasting the Archaic themes of the early chapters. The argument proceeds along the lines of a pharmacological pilgrim’s progress. Thus I have called the four sections of the book “Paradise,” “Paradise Lost,” “Hell,” and, hopefully not too optimistically, “Paradise Regained?” A glossary of special terms appears at the end of the book.

Obviously, we cannot continue to think about drug use in the same old ways. As a global society, we must find a new guiding image for our culture, one that unifies the aspirations of humanity with the needs of the planet and the individual. Analysis of the existential incompleteness within us that drives us to form relationships of dependency and addiction with plants and drugs will show that at the dawn of history, we lost something precious, the absence of which has made us ill with narcissism. Only a recovery of the relationship that we evolved with nature through use of psychoactive plants before the fall into history can offer us hope of a humane and open-ended future.

Before we commit ourselves irrevocably to the chimera of a drug-free culture purchased at the price of a complete jettisoning of the ideals of a free and democratic planetary society, we must ask hard questions: Why, as a species, are we so fascinated by altered states of consciousness? What has been their impact on our esthetic and spiritual aspirations? What have we lost by denying the legitimacy of each individual’s drive to use substances to experience personally the transcendental and the

sacred? My hope is that answering these questions will force us to confront the consequences of denying nature's spiritual dimension, of seeing nature as nothing more than a "resource" to be fought over and plundered. Informed discussion of these issues will give no comfort to the control-obsessed, no comfort to know-nothing religious fundamentalism, no comfort to beige fascism of whatever form.

The question of how we, as a society and as individuals, relate to psychoactive plants in the late twentieth century, raises a larger question: how, over time, have we been shaped by the shifting alliances that we have formed and broken with various members of the vegetable world as we have made our way through the maze of history? This is a question that will occupy us in some detail in the chapters to come.

The Ur-myth of our culture opens in the Garden of Eden, with the eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. If we do not learn from our past, this story could end with a planet toxified, its forests a memory, its biological cohesion shattered, our birth legacy a weed-choked wasteland. If we have overlooked something in our previous attempts to understand our origins and place in nature, are we now in a position to look back and to understand, not only our past, but our future, in an entirely new way? If we can recover the lost sense of nature as a living mystery, we can be confident of new perspectives on the cultural adventure that surely must lie ahead. We have the opportunity to move away from the gloomy historical nihilism that characterizes the reign of our deeply patriarchal, dominator culture. We are in a position to regain the Archaic appreciation of our near-symbiotic relationship with psychoactive plants as a wellspring of insight and coordination flowing from the vegetable world to the human world.

The mystery of our own consciousness and powers of self-reflection is somehow linked to this channel of communication with the unseen mind that shamans insist is the spirit of the

living world of nature. For shamans and shamanic cultures, exploration of this mystery has always been a credible alternative to living in a confining materialist culture. We of the industrial democracies can choose to explore these unfamiliar dimensions now or we can wait until the advancing destruction of the living planet makes all further exploration irrelevant.

A NEW MANIFESTO

The time has therefore come, in the great natural discourse that is the history of ideas, thoroughly to rethink our fascination with habitual use of psychoactive and physioactive plants. We have to learn from the excesses of the past, especially the 1960s, but we cannot simply advocate “Just say no” any more than we can advocate “Try it, you’ll like it.” Nor can we support a view that wishes to divide society into users and nonusers. We need a comprehensive approach to these questions that encompasses the deeper evolutionary and historical implications.

The mutation-inducing influence of diet on early humans and the effect of exotic metabolites on the evolution of their neurochemistry and culture is still unstudied territory. The early hominids’ adoption of an omnivorous diet and their discovery of the power of certain plants were decisive factors in moving early humans out of the stream of animal evolution and into the fast-rising tide of language and culture. Our remote ancestors discovered that certain plants, when self-administered, suppress appetite, diminish pain, supply bursts of sudden energy, confer immunity against pathogens, and synergize cognitive activities. These discoveries set us on the long journey to self-reflection. Once we became tool-using omnivores, evolution itself changed from a process of slow modification of our physical form to a rapid definition of cultural forms by the elaboration of rituals, languages, writing, mnemonic skills, and technology.

These immense changes occurred largely as a result of the synergies between human beings and the various plants with which they interacted and co-evolved. An honest appraisal of the impact of plants on the foundations of human institutions would find them to be absolutely primary. In the future, the application of botanically inspired steady-state solutions, such as zero population growth, hydrogen extraction from seawater, and massive recycling programs, may help reorganize our societies and planet along more holistic, environmentally aware, neo-Archaic lines.

The suppression of the natural human fascination with altered states of consciousness and the present perilous situation of all life on earth are intimately and causally connected. When we suppress access to shamanic ecstasy, we close off the refreshing waters of emotion that flow from having a deeply bonded, almost symbiotic relationship to the earth. As a consequence, the maladaptive social styles that encourage overpopulation, resource mismanagement, and environmental toxification develop and maintain themselves. No culture on earth is as heavily narcotized as the industrial West in terms of being inured to the consequences of maladaptive behavior. We pursue a business-as-usual attitude in a surreal atmosphere of mounting crises and irreconcilable contradictions.

As a species, we need to acknowledge the depth of our historical dilemma. We will continue to play with half a deck as long as we continue to tolerate cardinals of government and science who presume to dictate where human curiosity can legitimately focus its attention and where it cannot. Such restrictions on the human imagination are demeaning and preposterous. The government not only restricts research on psychedelics that could conceivably yield valuable psychological and medical insights, it presumes to prevent their religious and spiritual use, as well. Religious use of psychedelic plants is a civil rights issue; its restriction is the repression of a legitimate

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religious sensibility. In fact, it is not a religious sensibility that is being repressed, but *the* religious sensibility, an experience of *religio* based on the plant – human relationships that were in place long before the advent of history.

We can no longer postpone an honest reappraisal of the true costs and benefits of habitual use of plants and drugs versus the true costs and benefits of suppression of their use. Our global culture finds itself in danger of succumbing to an Orwellian effort to bludgeon the problem out of existence through military and police terrorism directed toward drug consumers in our own population and drug producers in the Third World. This repressive response is largely fueled by an unexamined fear that is the product of misinformation and historical ignorance.

Deep-seated cultural biases explain why the Western mind turns suddenly anxious and repressive on contemplating drugs. Substance-induced changes in consciousness dramatically reveal that our mental life has physical foundations. Psychoactive drugs thus challenge the Christian assumption of the inviolability and special ontological status of the soul. Similarly, they challenge the modern idea of the ego and its inviolability and control structures. In short, encounters with psychedelic plants throw into question the entire world view of the dominator culture.

We will come across this theme of the ego and the dominator culture often in this reexamination of history. In fact, the terror the ego feels in contemplating the dissolution of boundaries between self and world not only lies behind the suppression of altered states of consciousness but, more generally, explains the suppression of the feminine, the foreign and exotic, and transcendental experiences. In the prehistoric but post-Archaic times of about 5000 to 3000 B.C., suppression of partnership society by patriarchal invaders set the stage for suppression of the open-ended experimental investigation of nature carried on by shamans. In highly organized societies that Archaic tradition

was replaced by one of dogma, priestcraft, patriarchy, warfare and, eventually, “rational and scientific” or dominator values.

To this point I have used the terms “partnership” and “dominator” styles of culture without explanation. I owe these useful terms to Riane Eisler and her important re-visioning of history, *The Chalice and the Blade*.⁴ Eisler has advanced the notion that “partnership” models of society preceded and later competed with, and were oppressed by, “dominator” forms of social organization. Dominator cultures are hierarchical, paternalistic, materialistic, and male-dominated. Eisler believes that the tension between the partnership and dominator organizations and the overexpression of the dominator model are responsible for our alienation from nature, from ourselves, and from each other.

Eisler has written a brilliant synthesis of the emergence of human culture in the ancient Near East and the unfolding political debate concerning the feminizing of culture and the need to overcome patterns of male dominance in creating a viable future. Her analysis of gender politics raises the level of debate beyond those who have so shrilly hailed and decried this or that ancient “matriarchy” or “patriarchy.” *The Chalice and the Blade* introduces the notion of “partnership societies” and “dominator societies” and uses the archaeological record to argue that over vast areas and for many centuries the partnership societies of the ancient Middle East were without warfare and upheaval. Warfare and patriarchy arrived with the appearance of dominator values.

THE DOMINATOR INHERITANCE

Our culture, self-toxified by the poisonous by-products of technology and egocentric ideology, is the unhappy inheritor of the dominator attitude that alteration of consciousness by the use of plants or substances is somehow wrong, onanistic, and

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perversely antisocial. I will argue that suppression of shamanic gnosis, with its reliance and insistence on ecstatic dissolution of the ego, has robbed us of life's meaning and made us enemies of the planet, of ourselves, and our grandchildren. We are killing the planet in order to keep intact the wrongheaded assumptions of the ego-dominator cultural style.

It is time for change.

I

PARADISE



