

## Schelling's "Identity Philosophy" as a Metaphysical Framework to Interpret Psychedelic-Induced Mystical Experiences

Ingesting a high enough dose of a psychedelic substance can lead to one of the deepest and most meaningful experiences of a person's life, often referred to as a *mystical experience*. Most people wake up from these ecstatic states with the certainty of having witnessed something ineffable, beyond all possible explanations, great and powerful. While it's impressively easy to reach such states, understanding their true meaning, what *really* happens when one gets there, has proven to be an herculean task. To be precise, what we're missing the most in the quest to confer meaning to these episodes is a metaphysical framework, a description of the fundamental nature of reality that makes it possible to interpret them. The key point of discussion here for contemporary philosophers and scientists seems to be the nature of consciousness: is it just a product of brain activity or is there more to it? Is consciousness perhaps a fundamental "brick" of reality? Or maybe something altogether different? Giving a definite answer to questions of this sort would lead to a pivotal point for science, metaphysics and, consequently, for the understanding of mystical experiences. This pursuit has led researchers in the field of psychedelics to turn to the history of philosophy and the history of religion for inspiration, thus revisiting and reconsidering various traditions from animism to neoplatonism, from medieval religious mysticism to psychoanalysis. In this article I will suggest that one relevant philosopher has been largely left out of the discussion: Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775-1854). Bertrand Russell, in what's likely the most famous book on the history of western philosophy ever written, spends only a few words on Schelling's thought, among which: "philosophically, though famous in his day, he is not important" (2019). There are, I think, two main reasons for this general attitude: first, Schelling's works are impressively difficult to grasp and, second, he's now commonly regarded as a transition figure between two other major philosophers. I will obviously not suggest that we *should* read psychedelic experiences through Schelling's philosophy, rather that his thought can offer an interesting and plausible perspective on how to interpret them and on how to understand reality as a whole.

Let's begin by identifying some common characteristics of all mystical episodes induced by hallucinogens. To do this we can refer to William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Psychedelic experiences are not the main interest of the book, however, the thoughts of the famous philosopher and psychologist can be easily extended to our topic. James wrote: "in mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness. This is the everlasting and triumphant mystical tradition, hardly altered by differences of clime or creed" (2009, p. 228). Ingesting high doses of psilocybin, LSD or of other psychedelic substances is usually associated with losing the sense of being a "self": you cease being an I, an individual opposed to the rest of the external world, and you become one with Everything, or, vice versa, you become a "nothing" in "Everythingness". Psychedelic drugs can completely disrupt the internal-external, subject-object antithesis, making the experience "cosmic in scale" (McKenna, 1992). James also proposes "four marks which, when an experience has them, may justify us in calling it mystical" (2009, p. 206):

1. Ineffability. The experience defies linguistic expression, mental concepts and logical categories, making it impossible to fully explain its potency and character to someone who hasn't had it. This feature has to do with the above-mentioned de-subjectivation: humans use language to understand the external world, when there ceases to be a "subject" and an "external world" (or, one could say, when the two things become one)

language becomes a thing of the past, a useless tool.

2. Noetic quality. Mystical experiences are not understood as “hallucinations” (“it’s all happening in your mind”) by those who have them, on the contrary, they acquire the force of revealed Truth, undoubtable knowledge. This might also have to do with the disintegration of subjectivity: how can you have doubts about the veracity of an experience when there is no “you” to doubt it and no object to have doubts on? The other possible explanation is that these states of transcendence are simply true, and that’s why they appear as such (Pollan, 2019).
3. Transiency. The psychedelic-induced mystical state doesn’t persist for a long time, ranging from a few minutes when smoking N, N-Dimethyltryptamine (DMT) to some hours, for example, on LSD.
4. Passivity. The mystic doesn’t see himself or herself as the active subject (what “subject”?) or cause of the experience, they rather feel as if they’re being grasped by something bigger than them, a superior power. The mystical experience is one of surrender.

One can easily see, even after this short survey on the topic, how such a profound and life-changing experience can make people question everything, from the nature of their mind to the nature of reality. While some people emerge from mystic ecstasy with the certainty of having met God (however one defines “God”), other just recognize the fact that the mind (or consciousness) is (or can be) “wider” than we usually think – something that experienced meditators know far too well. This is where the “reductionist” approach to consciousness – the idea that consciousness is a complex product of something simpler, such as the neural activity in the physical brain – starts to crumble: it’s hard to see how the brain could produce a transcending, ineffable experience of absolute knowledge. This doesn’t obviously mean that reductionists are necessarily wrong, the whole experience could in fact be an illusion created by the psychedelic-stimulated brain. This article needs not become a discussion on the nature of consciousness, I simply wish to suggest that a different route than that of the reductionist can be taken, a route, inspired by Schelling’s philosophical system, which would take seriously and account perfectly for the mystical experience.

Schelling makes extensive use of the terms “subjective” and “objective”, so before jumping into his philosophy we need to clarify what we mean by them. It’s not easy to translate these two ontological categories (as he meant them) into modern, scientific terms, but for the sake of our discussion we can understand “subject” as “individual consciousness” – the pure, subjective experience of the world, the space where everything appears to us – and “object” as “matter”, or as “the external world”, everything that is perceived as “other” by the subject. In general, objectivity is “non-subjectivity”, everything that’s not pure consciousness, whether that’s the real, external, material world, or something appearing *in* consciousness (if the two can be distinguished at all). Mind that I have no interest here in being academically rigorous about Schelling’s philosophy, I’m rather interested in using his ideas as a launchpad to interpret an old issue in modern terms. One last remark: Schelling’s thought is usually divided by scholars into phases, here I will take into consideration what is referred to as his “Identity Philosophy”, contained in *Presentation of My System of Philosophy*.

First of all, Schelling recognizes that in our everyday life we distinguish subjectivity and

objectivity, we see these two categories as opposed to each other: the conscious subjects separate themselves from the world they see through their senses, and they consider it to be something existing outside of them. If you now look at an object in front of you, you see it as something external, opposed to you. You and that object are not the same thing. Almost every single activity in a regular human's life, from shopping to scientific research, is based on this assumption. While this state of affairs might feel as real as it gets, Schelling suggests instead that the exact opposite is true. According to him this subject-object antithesis is an *illusion*, a product of the human mind, and a fundamental unity of all things stands instead behind it. Unity is real, separation is not (Schelling, 2001, § 28). This idea is far from being original, in fact perhaps every single person who's tried psychedelics has thought of something similar. What's of real interest to us is how Schelling develops and clarifies this first cue.

What are the characteristics of this fundamental Unity of reality, this *substrate*? To begin with, Schelling considers it to be *eternal*: it's always been there and will always be there, it has no origin and no end (2001, § 13). Not by chance in his later works he refers to It as "God", even though his technical name for this eternal Unity is "Reason". Here I will use the former to make the reading easier. The concept of eternity is hard to wrap our minds around, but it seems necessary when we try to understand reality as a whole. Everything in the universe seems to have a cause, but then that cause must have a cause, and so on, all the way back to the big bang; but then also the big bang must have a cause. When and Where does this chain stop? It seems like we need some sort of *uncaused cause* at the end of the chain, that is, something eternal that can justify the existence of everything else. To some westerners at the beginning of the chain we find the Christian god, on the contrary, according to some scientists, cosmic inflation is the uncaused substrate we are looking for. Eternity is as challenging to think of as it is unavoidable.

With this said, we can now specify what Schelling's God is. He describes It as "total indifference of the objective and the subjective" (2001, § 1). In the Absolute there is no opposition, there's no individual consciousness opposed to an external world, on the contrary, the two things are one. Moreover, in God there are no "parts" (how can there be parts in Unity itself?), It merely is an unspecified unity of consciousness itself and matter itself, where there are no subjects (and therefore no "individual" consciousness) and no objects (2001, §§ 3, 25; Mori, 2018, pp. 297-298). To be even more precise, we could say that in Schelling's God subjectivity and objectivity are *unseparated* but *distinguishable*: we can reasonably say that consciousness and matter are two features of God, but not that they are existing as something specific and independent yet (2001, p. 343). In modern terms, our philosopher's approach precedes the division between reductionists and non-reductionists. Again, reductionists, generally speaking, think that individual consciousness is a product of low-level phenomena, vice versa, non-reductionists believe that consciousness is a fundamental feature of reality, since there seems to be no explanation for how material, unconscious processes could produce a subjective experience of the world. Contrary to all of this, Schelling thinks that something precedes consciousness and matter as we know them, that there is a fundamental Unity where these two features cannot yet be properly separated. Nonetheless, Schelling's approach is closer to that of some non-reductionists, since he thinks that neither matter, nor consciousness have priority, they are co-eternal in Unity. His thought could also be associated with *panpsychism* (from the Greek words *pan-psyche*, everything-soul), the idea that consciousness is fundamental and ubiquitous in nature, specifying however that in Schelling's Unity of consciousness and matter there are no specific "things" yet (in this sense we could not claim that a

rock or an atom are conscious for Schelling, since there are no specific “rocks” and “atoms” in God, but a traditional panpsychist would).

But how do we get individual things from this eternal Unity? As I have already anticipated, separateness (both between subject and object, and between the various objects in the “external” world) is thought by Schelling to be an illusion, a product of the human mind. “Things” are a “nothing” created by imagination (2001, § 1): when the unspecified consciousness in God becomes subjectivity, an individual consciousness, that person starts to consider himself or herself as something different from what they experience through their senses. Moreover, humans use language to understand the “external” world, thus reinforcing this sense of separation. There are no “objects” if there is no conscious human using language to name them, i.e. there is no “phone” if there is no human that experiences it as something in the world, “extracts” it from Unity and calls it a phone. Therefore, consciousness and matter themselves are *ontologically grounded* (in God), but individual consciousness and individual material objects are not (they are “nothing”) (2001, § 28 and “remark”). What we commonly refer to as “the real world”, far from being real, is an illusory product of subjectivity that rests upon a substrate of eternal unity, Reality itself.

Now it’s a good time to start reintroducing psychedelic substances and mystical experiences into the picture. In his work Schelling suggests that we can have an “intellectual intuition” of the Absolute. This form of knowledge must be *immediate*, not mediated by language and concepts, since these are only useful in our everyday world, where we can create finite objects by putting raw sensory data into conceptual boxes. In an earlier work, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, our philosopher also suggests that *art* can help us penetrate our illusory world and have an insight into Unity. Art can represent the Absolute, manifest what is not accessible through rationality, what cannot be said (Bowie, 2020). This classic romantic idea is also explored in one of the most famous essays in psychedelic literature, Aldous Huxley’s *The Doors of Perception*, where the author explicitly associates the aesthetic experience of the Infinite with the psychedelic-induced mystical experience. According to both Schelling and Huxley art is a possible “Door in the Wall”, a route to God, but Huxley also suggests that this meeting can be achieved more effectively using hallucinogens.

We can now connect all the dots and reach a conclusion. Accepting Schelling’s (or a Schelling-like) account of reality would leave almost nothing of the mystical experience unexplained. The disintegration of our sense of identity could be interpreted as a *return* to what we really are, to that indistinct Unity of consciousness and matter that precedes subjectivity. Psilocybin mushrooms, among other substances, would break the illusion of separateness in reality, revealing Eternity itself. In particular, this identification of the subject with Eternity would account extraordinarily well for the disruption of the sense of time (another category that humans use to engage reality) that mystics and psychonauts report. At the same time, the other marks of the ecstatic state listed by William James – its noetic quality, ineffability and passivity – would all be perfectly justified by the fact that the psychedelic-induced transcendental experience is nothing other than the experience of re-becoming God. More than art, meditation and other means, drugs could be our best tool to break the spell.

There is one major issue that Schelling left unresolved in his philosophy. Some of the readers might have already noticed this gap in his explanation of reality: how do we get from the Infinite to the finite? As we have seen, separateness (finitude) is an illusion produced by the human mind, but

how does the human mind spring out of God? In other words, reality is a construction of subjectivity, but how does subjectivity emerge from the eternal indistinct Unity of objectivity and subjectivity? (Mori, 2018, p. 298; Bowie, 2020). A possible answer could be hinted at by partially diverging from Schelling's reasoning. We could for example advance the hypothesis that the eternal Unity of consciousness and matter is not some sort of abstract metaphysical entity that precedes the universe as we know it, as Schelling thought, but the actual universe itself. We would be living in an eternal, conscious, unified universe and the mystical experience would simply be the experience of reality-in-itself, that is, reality as it is before humans apply their mental categories to it, before humans illusorily separate themselves from that eternal Unity (what I have precisely in mind will be clearer in the next paragraph). Apart from sounding more plausible to a modern reader, this "naturalization" of Schelling's philosophy would still have all the explanatory power of his philosophical system and it would allow us to start answering its unavoidable problem of the origin of individual consciousness.

Our next job, if we consider the Schellingian proposal worthy of development, is to turn it into a scientific hypothesis and find evidence in favor of it. My suggestion is that a Schelling-inspired scientific research program would mix the idea that human reality is an illusion, with some form of *cosmopsychism* (the idea that the universe *as a whole* is conscious), thus allowing an elegant explanation for both mystical experiences and the mystery of consciousness. Both of these radical ideas have contemporary proponents and scientific evidence to back them up. Let's start with cosmopsychism. Its "basic" version, panpsychism, has its roots in the belief that materialism will never be able to explain how consciousness "emerges" from matter, and therefore tries to justify the existence of subjectivity starting from a totally different assumption, that is, as we have seen, the idea that consciousness is fundamental and ubiquitous in nature. In its most common version, panpsychism assumes that the constitutive elements of the universe (e.g. quarks) are conscious (or proto-conscious). These traditional panpsychists, then, have to deal with the so called "combination problem": it's not clear how these conscious fundamentals should unite, or "fuse" with each other to create a single "big" consciousness (such as that of human beings). Here's where cosmopsychism comes into play: what if there's no such thing as individual consciousness? What if the universe *as a whole* is conscious, and what we regard as individual consciousness is just a particular manifestation of that universal consciousness? Indeed, the cosmopsychist solution is very speculative, but, in my opinion, not much more speculative than most positions in the field of consciousness studies (for a very recent defense of this view see (Keppler and Shani, 2020)). For what concerns instead the idea that reality is a human illusion, Donald Hoffman's *The Case Against Reality* provides strong scientific evidence in favor of it. Using evolutionary game theory, the neuroscientist aims to prove how humans have not evolved to see reality as it is, but only to see what allows them to survive. This implies, according to Hoffmann, that our sensory, space-temporal experience of the universe (grounded, we could add, in the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity) is not a mirror of reality, but simply a useful interface for humans to survive long enough to reproduce. If we now put these two ideas together, we get a modern Schellingian account of reality: the universe as we know it, characterized by separateness and finitude, is an evolutionary construct of our mind, and the-universe-in-itself is an eternal unity of universal consciousness (since individual consciousness is also an illusory product of evolution) and unidentified matter.

Assuming, very boldly, that what I've said until now is true, I believe that mystical experiences represent: (1) the disintegration of our fake, illusory everyday reality and (2) a return to that unified,

conscious universe that we originally are.

Let me remind you, in conclusion, what was our starting point for this mind-bending reinterpretation of reality as a whole: psychedelics. If nothing else, I would like for this essay to be a testimony to the power of these substances: when a fungus, or a cactus, or a toad's venom force you to rethink almost every single thing that you believe in, from your own existence to the fundamental structure of the universe, you can be certain that you have something worthy of investigation in your hands.

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