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The Agency-First Epistemology of Psychedelics

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Abstract

Letheby's book is an engaging and crystal-clear exploration of the philosophical issues raised by the use of psychedelic drugs. In this paper, we focus on the epistemological issues Letheby examines in chapter 8 and argue that his analysis requires an agency-first approach to epistemic evaluation. On an agency-first approach, epistemic evaluation is about identifying the skills agents need to acquire in order to pursue and fulfil their epistemic goals.

Keywords

Epistemology · Agency · Psychedelics · Self-know-how · Skills · Self-regulation

This article is part of a symposium on Chris Letheby's book "Philosophy of Psychedelics" (OUP 2021), edited by Chiara Caporuscio and Sascha Benjamin Fink.

1 Introduction

Letheby's book is an engaging and crystal-clear exploration of the philosophical issues raised by the use of psychedelic drugs. While reviewing the conceptual and empirical literature bearing on the topic, Letheby also succeeds in shifting the way we think about fundamental aspects of our existence, from knowledge to spirituality, from the structure of the self to aim of therapy. We were genuinely intrigued and challenged by the claims Letheby powerfully defends throughout the book. In the limited space we have here, we will focus on the epistemological issues Letheby examines in chapter 8.

Just like Letheby, we have also drawn attention in recent work to the positive contributions of cognitions that misrepresent reality or violate norms of rationality (Bortolotti, 2020; Murphy-Hollies, forthcoming). Letheby compels the reader

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to re-examine many common-sense assumptions about what it means to hallucinate, asking what epistemic benefits the psychedelic experience can have and whether there are any reasons to believe that its beneficial effects are long lasting. One temptation in this area is to see psychedelics as a source of hallucination and false beliefs that make us feel better in some way but compromise the accuracy of our representations of reality. Letheby challenges this trade-off view, arguing that psychedelic experiences have epistemic benefits of their own.

Letheby's arguments for the epistemic benefits of psychedelics won't be persuasive unless the traditional aims and nature of epistemic evaluation are revisited, departing from the received view that epistemic evaluation is confined to the project of examining a belief for its truth and well-groundedness. This is not a criticism of Letheby's project but a wholehearted endorsement of a broader understanding of the role of epistemic evaluation. This broader understanding can be cashed out in several ways (see [Henderson & Greco, 2015](#), for some examples), but here we will explore the idea that the purpose of epistemic evaluation is to identify epistemic practices that support successful agency, and that successful agents have skills that enable them to pursue and fulfil their epistemic goals.

2 Agency first

In recent work in epistemology, an important shift can be identified. We move from asking whether the agent's belief is true and well-grounded to asking whether the belief enables the agent to succeed in their epistemic practices. Suppose that Mary, as a result of her psychedelic experience, comes to believe that she is spiritually connected with nature. A traditional epistemologist may ask whether Mary has any good evidence for that belief or whether the belief accurately represents how things are.

But there is another important question to ask, whether for Mary adopting a belief about being spiritually connected with nature means that she can be a more successful epistemic agent overall. What is going to change in Mary's behaviour due to that belief? Are any of the changes relevant to her epistemic performance? In this framework, the neat distinction between epistemic and psychological effects of the agent's practices comes under pressure. Letheby challenges the assumption that false or ill-grounded beliefs act merely as comforting illusions, enhancing the agent's wellbeing at the expense of their grasp of reality. In some contexts, comforting illusions may enhance an agent's wellbeing *and* also be the most effective means for that agent to maintain a firm grasp on reality.

Traditionally, epistemic evaluation concerns outputs of reasoning tasks, beliefs, theories, and it measures their accuracy, well-groundedness, coherence. The outcome of such evaluations is an important guide to decision-making. If we realise that a belief is insufficiently supported by evidence, we may choose to abandon it, or suspend judgement until more evidence is available.

But what can we say about the agent who engages in those epistemic practices, the agent who produces inaccurate reasoning outputs, adopts ill-grounded beliefs, endorses incoherent theories? Does their local failure suggest that they are unsuccessful in the pursuit of their epistemic goals overall? When epistemic evaluation concerns not merely the single output, the belief or the theory, but the interaction of the agent with their environment, a more complex picture emerges. We realise that the agent's psychological make-up and social context affect what the agent can achieve epistemically, not just by revealing unsurmountable limitations but also by bringing to the fore the often-neglected role of mood and motivation for the pursuit of epistemic goals (Bortolotti, 2020).

Let's see how this can apply to the *epistemology of psychedelics*. Letheby identifies a number of epistemic benefits that can be attributed, either directly or indirectly, to the experiences Mary has when she takes psychedelic drugs:

1. a capacity to access emotions and feelings that she may not have been fully aware of before using psychedelic drugs (e.g., Mary can gain access to the irrational jealousy sometimes driving her behaviour and missing from her previous model of herself);
2. a capacity to adopt a more open attitude towards the uncertain and the unknown, becoming more curious, accepting, and open-minded (e.g., Mary becomes more skilled at letting go of her thoughts prior to meditation practice);
3. an enhanced realisation of what is possible (e.g., Mary now realises that her mind has a vast unrealised potential and that her sense of self is not set in stone and can be changed);
4. an appreciation of previously known facts under a new mode of presentation (e.g., Mary already believed that she was interconnected with nature, but she now appreciates that connection in a different way);
5. a preservation of psychosocial functionality leading her to exchange information with others and extend her appreciation of possibilities for change (e.g., the reduction in Mary's anxiety enables her to function better socially and her experience of alternative possibilities enhances her capacity to imagine a different future for herself).

None of these benefits can be captured by analysing the single perceptions or beliefs that are due to Mary's psychedelic experience. The effects as Letheby describes them concern epistemic agency as a whole and the capacity to adapt to new situations and evolve; preserve or restore engagement with the surrounding environment; and gain knowledge of the self by realising that the self is malleable. The epistemology of psychedelics is an *agency-first* epistemology, and that is why it has something important to say about what other things agents care about beyond knowledge, such as psychological wellbeing, mental health, and the meaningfulness of their lives.

3 Self-know-how

Letheby argues that many of the epistemic benefits of psychedelics can be applied to learning about, and making changes to, oneself. These possibilities for self-insights and self-change are exciting. Letheby invites us to imagine that Mary sees herself as a generous and selfless person, and yet sometimes she harbours irrational jealousy and selfish motivations. Given the moral and normative consequences of jealousy and selfishness, what tools are available to Mary so that she can fix these failings? Here, Letheby's views about psychedelics can provide us with new ideas, which complement strategies which we discussed elsewhere (Murphy-Hollies, forthcoming).

When agents live up to the good traits which they like to regard themselves as having, this may be incentivised by imperfect cognitions, such as post-hoc rationalisation, confabulation, and self-deception. Imperfect cognitions may explain why Mary doesn't realise that she can be irrationally jealous and selfish. Yet, such imperfect cognitions are not merely inhibitory—yes, they hide the agent's own shortcomings, but there is more to them than that. They can contribute to the process of self-change.

Having 'self-know-how' enables agents to more robustly live up to their self-concept. Self-know-how is a skilful form of self-regulation: agents can bridge the gap between how they see themselves and how they really behave. The idea comes from de Bruin and Strijbos (2020) who discuss self-know-how in relation to the agent preserving first-person authority over their self-ascriptions even when they make inaccurate self-ascriptions, as in instances of confabulation. In essence, although agents may self-ascribe traits which they do not have—such as Mary thinking of herself as selfless while having selfish motivations—they can make the illusory self-ascriptions a reality.

What does this self-know-how involve? Agents need to be open-minded and flexible with regards to their interpretation of themselves and of the situation they find themselves in. They need to be receptive to how others see them, as in the process that Wilson calls 'self-revelation' (Wilson, 2002). They need to be curious about, and attentive to, their own thoughts and feelings. They need to be cautiously confident in their own appraisals without being arrogant or paralysed by self-doubt. Thanks to such attitudes, agents can regulate their own behaviour, and close the gap between their self-descriptions and the reality of their behaviour. In other words, they can make changes to themselves in the direction they desire.

Letheby's views on the effects of psychedelic drugs on human experience nicely complement considerations about self-know-how, suggesting that psychedelics such as psilocybin can enable people to see themselves as mutable and in control of the stories they tell about themselves. Letheby suggests that psychedelics can provide 'knowledge-how': Mary gains know-how when she starts to pay attention to her own mental states in a more open, decentred, and flexible way.

Furthermore, the other forms of knowledge discussed by Letheby can also be seen as instances of agents acquiring new insights into themselves, seeing themselves as changeable, and making changes to the self:

- Psilocybin can relax and inhibit self-related priors, which ordinarily work defensively to protect Mary's more egoistic and flattering conceptions of herself. Hence, she can gain more accurate insights into herself and her motivations.
- Mary can experience herself as a mutable and contingent being, and realise that her sense of herself is a story which she has the power to rewrite.
- Psilocybin expands the boundaries of what Mary can access phenomenally, so that she can experience differently certain beliefs which she already had about herself.
- Indirectly, preserving psychosocial functioning and facilitating interactions with others can empower Mary to imagine other ways of being and fitting into the world, bypassing some of the cognitive biases which pathologies such as depression and anxiety can bring.

On de Bruin and Strijbos's account of self-know-how and Letheby's account of the role of psychedelics, agents eventually accept and embody new self-concepts. Via self-know-how, agents might draw on their own reflections and the input of others to consider new self-related ideas and behaviours. Via psychedelics, agents can directly experience new conceptions of themselves which they would not otherwise be open to—experiences with psychedelics might present new self-related ideas and behaviours directly to agents. Both approaches invite us to think of self-knowledge as an *activity* as opposed to a special type of unaided introspection or sheer willpower.

As Letheby writes, coming to know ourselves as constructed and mutable enables us to change our story.

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