

BOOK REVIEW

Otherworlds: Psychedelics and Exceptional Human Experience
by David Luke. London: Muswell Hill Press, 2017. 298 pp. \$20.47
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Luke’s book, broadly speaking, reviews phenomenological experiences and experimental research on psychedelics, sometimes referred to as entheogens, as tools for increasing psi. The first section of the book, “Explorations of Entheogen Experiences” paints an exciting landscape filled with profound psychedelic experiences and their implications. As the book begins, it is readable, fun, and invites a wide audience into its otherworldly charm. The second section of the book, “Do Psychedelics Like Psilocybin Really Cause Psi?” is a more serious academic journey through the details of the research on psychedelics for eliciting psi. The research spans many fields of study, appealing to scientific researchers, physicians, pharmacologists, psychotherapists, shamanic practitioners, anthropologists, and psychedelic experiencers.

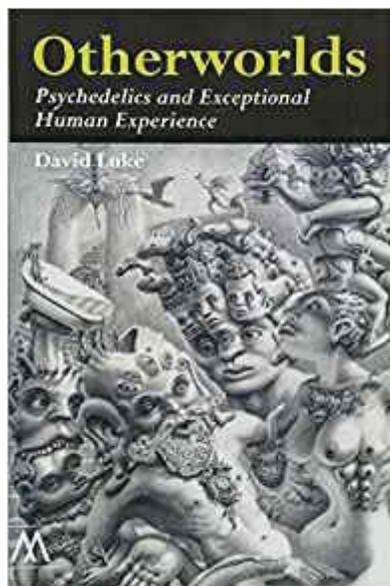
Purpose

Luke’s opinion about the ability of psychedelics to facilitate paranormal experiences or psi is clear from the beginning of the book, and he makes no attempt to suggest otherwise. His confidence is a result of his own psychedelic experiences and research, and an in-depth review of the scientific literature. Luke provides a thorough examination of the empirical and theoretical literature on exceptional human experiences mediated by psychedelics, with particular attention paid to psi experiences, including clairvoyance, telepathy, and precognition. A wide variety of psychedelically mediated experiences are examined, including synesthesia, interspecies communication, experiencing discarnate entities, out-of-body experiences, near-death experiences, and eco-consciousness, to name only a few. The psychedelics evaluated in the book include LSD, psilocybin, DMT, ayahuasca, mescaline, peyote, san pedro, salvia divinorum, and more. *Otherworlds* is an amalgamation of Luke’s captivating anecdotal experiences, scientific articles, and scholarly commentary.

Overview

The book begins with an exploration of the cactus san pedro, including its history as a sacrament and its ability to elicit psychic abilities. Luke describes his personal experiences with the cactus and the results of his research using himself as the subject (Chapter 1). The next chapter examines ayahuasca and incorporation, being taken over or possessed by the spirit of the substance, for religious and shamanic purposes, including shape-shifting, mediumship, and flight (Chapter 2). Following is a systematic literature review of experiences of synesthesia mediated by a wide range of chemical agents, which includes psychedelics and also non-psychedelics such as alcohol and tobacco (Chapter 3). The next chapter explores entopic phenomena, or visual experiences derived from visual system physiology. Luke links ancient rock art with psychedelic use and describes similar visual patterns across both, including spirals, grids, lattices, and more (Chapter 4). The following chapter is an exploration of the experience of and research on DMT, and examines the history, psychopharmacology, and phenomenology of the DMT experience, including its cartography and the perception of discarnate entities (Chapter 5). The next chapter dives deeper into the entities commonly encountered on psychedelics, in particular entities that have multiple eyes. Luke describes his own profound DMT experiences when he perceived a being with many eyes by the Ganges River in India. A discussion follows on the possibility that an objective being, Azrael, is being perceived across these similar subjective experiences (Chapter 6). The next chapter is rather brief and describes species connectedness that is sometimes experienced through psychedelic use, including with plants, animals, and the earth (Chapter 7). The chapter describes approaches to these experiences from animism and shamanism, and is also sprinkled with personal anecdotes. Ultimately, psychedelics may promote ecological connectedness and in turn stewardship.

The second section reaches into the research across many fields, including transpersonal psychology, anthropology, ethnobotany, phytochemistry, psychiatry, psychotherapy, psychopharmacology, and neuropharmacology. The first chapter of the section explores the theoretical reasons for conducting psychedelic research as a means for eliciting paranormal experiences (Chapter 8). The next chapter is one of the longer chapters, and understandably so, as it is an examination of the neuroscientific models for paranormal experiences, including those arising from psychedelic use. Five models are explored including the brain filter theory, β -carboline and tryptamines, DMT, ketamine, and dopamine models (Chapter 9). Luke makes it clear that a single theory may not explain psychedelics and their associated paranormal experiences, that different psychedelics



may have different models, and that these models may address the soft problem but not the hard problem of consciousness. The following chapter takes an anthropological and historical approach to psychedelics ‘in the field’, including the personal experiences and views of renowned researchers, scientists, authors, and shamans (Chapter 10).

Reports on survey research of psychedelics and paranormal beliefs and experiences are examined in the next chapter (Chapter 11). Overall, psychedelic use is associated with paranormal beliefs, such as a belief in psi phenomena, and those who report ostensible paranormal experiences are significantly more likely to use psychedelics. Luke provides a detailed assessment of the research and a discussion of its limitations. The following chapter digs into the experimental research supporting the psychedelic elicitation of ostensible psi experiences, including forced choice and free response experiments (Chapter 12). An exploration of the benefits and limitations of both experimental approaches is discussed, with a conclusion that free response experiments seem more appropriate for the psychedelic user and experience.

The next chapter is a critique of the experimental research, its limitations, and possible future directions (Chapter 13). Experimental issues addressed include the study design and the reported difficulties of working with subjects under the influence of psychedelics, such as difficulty maintaining alertness, interest in the study or task, communication difficulties, the timing of assessments, use of placebos, the ideal psychedelic to test, and proper dosage. The final chapter is a summary of the previous thirteen chapters, as well as suggestions for future research, cautions, respecting the psychedelic as a sacred tool, and potential applications for researchers (Chapter 14).

Commentary

Overall, *Otherworlds* provides a thorough and novel approach by synthesizing the research on psychedelics and exceptional human experiences across a variety of fields of study, providing a comprehensive approach to the topic. The book is an enjoyable read, although the pace

tends to slow and quicken as it jumps from research study to experience. There is a refreshing circumvention of political or judicial issues associated with psychedelics apart from a brief mention, allowing the reader to focus on the experiences and the research without the baggage. *Otherworlds* is exactly that, a journey through other worlds, where the edge of the human experience of reality meets the edge of psychological science.

—**NATALIE L. TRENT**

The Center for Reiki Research
Southfield, Michigan, USA
natalie.leigh.trent@gmail.com