

Focus

Psychedelic Renaissance: Philosophical,  
Phenomenological, and Cultural Perspectives

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# Introduction

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The interest in psychedelic research has grown exponentially over the past few decades. This so-called *psychedelic renaissance* spans multiple fields, including pharmacology, neuroscience, anthropology, psychiatry, and philosophy. Such breadth makes psychedelic research inherently interdisciplinary, drawing researchers from diverse academic backgrounds. From a historical and anthropological perspective, psychedelics are deeply intertwined with human evolution and cultural development, making it nearly impossible to construct a definitive or comprehensive account of their significance. Scholars in these fields face the challenging task of gathering and interpreting data that must balance theoretical rigor with an appreciation for the unique ways psychedelics have shaped – and been shaped by – various cultures across time and space. Psychedelics have historically served as “cultural objects”, central to rituals and worldviews, a role they continue to occupy in certain contemporary groups and communities. In Western societies, however, the renewed interest in psychedelics has largely revolved around their recreational and medical applications, reflecting a form of “culturalization” that diverges from indigenous practices. While the therapeutic potential of psychedelics in indigenous contexts is often embedded within ritualistic and spiritual frameworks, modern psychiatric approaches in the West focus primarily on their medicalization. Specifically, psychedelics are being explored as treatments for psychiatric conditions such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD. This contrast underscores the complexity of integrating traditional and modern approaches to psychedelic use. Scientific research has grappled with the multifaceted challenge of developing a theoretical framework that accounts for how psychedelics exert their effects on mental health. These efforts span multiple layers of analysis, linking pharmacological mechanisms with neural, psychological, and social dimensions. Beyond the biological and psychological, political, religious, and cultural factors also play a pivotal role in shaping the transformative potential of psychedelics for individuals and societies.

Given this complexity, this special issue seeks to explore a range of critical and nuanced questions within the field of psychedelic research. By address-

ing areas that remain unclear or underexplored, the contributions in this issue aim to deepen our understanding of psychedelics and their multifaceted implications. The first two articles focus on historical and anthropological reasoning. Edoardo Pierini proposes historical considerations of set and setting with respect to opium use in the Early Modern period, highlighting inter-cultural dynamics and Early Modern debates on the variability of drug effects. The article argues that these historical reflections predate and can inform contemporary discussions of set and setting, particularly in the context of modern crises such as opioid dependency. By examining parallels between past and present, the study provides a unique perspective on the socio-cultural dimensions of psychoactive substance use.

In the second contribution, Paolo Pecere explores the cultural and therapeutic dimensions of psilocybin use, contrasting Western psychiatric frameworks with traditional Mazatec practices through original anthropological fieldwork. By examining the interplay of symbolic, social, and individualistic factors, the article highlights tensions between communal traditions and the commercialization of psychedelics. Pecere argues for the importance of integrating cultural and ceremonial contexts into contemporary therapeutic paradigms.

The third and fourth articles develop an integrative framework for understanding psychedelic efficacy by engaging with phenomenological literature. The authors reflect on epistemological and psychological issues surrounding psychedelic research, drawing on methods and categories from classical phenomenology. Both employ Husserlian phenomenology to study mental phenomena and propose connections with underlying neurocognitive and pharmacological mechanisms.

Davide Perrotta bridges psychobiology and phenomenology to explore the effects of psychedelics on the stream of consciousness. Rejecting a narrow focus on altered states, the article emphasizes the interplay between the lived body (*Leib*) and the nervous system (*Körper*), offering a nuanced framework that integrates phenomenological and neuroscientific perspectives. By examining how psychedelics affect emotion regulation and perceptual processes at both psychobiological and eidetic levels, Perrotta advances our understanding of their transformative potential. This work contributes significantly to philosophical and neuroscientific research, paving the way for future studies on therapeutic and cognitive implications.

Jacopo Colelli employs a phenomenological approach, grounded in Husserlian methodology and supported by anthropological data from the literature, to propose a critical rethinking of the biopsychosocial model in understanding psychedelic experiences. Through an analysis of consciousness structures like bodily intentionality and intersubjectivity, the article highlights how phenomenology transcends reductive frameworks, offering a more inte-

grative perspective on the transformative potential of psychedelics. By bridging insights from the humanities and natural sciences, the work underscores the importance of a holistic and interdisciplinary approach.

Finally, Dennis Forrest examines the relationship between subjective and therapeutic effects of psychedelics, highlighting a lack of clarity in the definitions of “subjective effects” and “hallucinogens” in the literature and practice. The article calls for greater precision in categorizing subjective phenomena and advocates for a normative approach that prioritizes effects associated with higher safety and broader accessibility. Emotional regulation and *mind-wandering* are identified as relevant psychological phenomena that may sustain mechanisms of change predictive of beneficial outcomes. By proposing alternative therapeutic pathways and emphasizing refined classifications for relevant subjective effects, the article provides valuable insights into the mechanisms and ethical dimensions of psychedelic therapies.

