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## Valuing the Acute Subjective Experience

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**ABSTRACT** Psychedelics, including psilocybin, and other consciousness-altering compounds such as 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA), currently are being scientifically investigated for their potential therapeutic uses, with a primary focus on measurable outcomes: for example, alleviation of symptoms or increases in self-reported well-being. Accordingly, much recent discussion about the possible value of these substances has turned on estimates of the magnitude and duration of persisting positive effects in comparison to harms. However, many have described the value of a psychedelic experience with little or no reference to such therapeutic benefits, instead seeming to find the experience valuable in its own right. How can we make sense of such testimony? Could a psychedelic experience be valuable even if there were no persisting beneficial effects? If so, how? Using the concept of psychological richness, combined with insights from the philosophy of aesthetics and the enhancement literature, this essay explores potential sources of value in the acute subjective experience, apart from the value derived from persisting beneficial effects.

Psychedelics, 5-HT<sub>2A</sub> agonists that reliably induce profoundly altered states of consciousness, are currently being investigated for their potential therapeutic benefits and for their capacity to enhance well-being, with growing public support for the appropriately supervised use of these substances toward either end (Sandbrink et al. 2024). Immediate and long-term risks are also being studied, with recent calls for more attention to possible harms (McNamee et al. 2023). The focus on outcomes makes good sense, as there is a significant need to find effective treatments for mental illness with better benefit-to-risk profiles, and drug development has been stalled for decades. Similarly, there is evidence that subjective well-being has stagnated, and many are interested in finding new strategies to improve well-being (Callaghan et al. 2021). Outcomes such as symptom reduction and changes in well-being typically are measured weeks or months after a psychedelic experience and are considered persisting effects. Thus, in many discussions, particularly within the biomedical context, the value of psychedelics is assumed to turn primarily on the magnitude and duration of such persisting beneficial effects in comparison to harms.

However, many have described what they see as the value of a psychedelic experience with little to no reference to persisting benefits of this sort. For example, Aldous Huxley's (1954) description of a psychedelic experience in *The Doors of Perception* includes a great deal of detail on the beauty of viewing a rose—suggesting, perhaps, an *aesthetic* value to the experience (Reid 1931; Goldman 1990; Stecker 2006; Määtänen 2012)—but places a comparatively lessened emphasis on reduced distress or enhanced mood in subsequent weeks (the primary outcomes of many contemporary studies). This seeming discrepancy prompts us to ask the following question. Might the psychedelic experience have value in its own right, even if there were *no* persisting beneficial effects?

Similar questions have arisen in other contexts. One is the current debate in the bioethical literature on the potential development of non-hallucinogenic or “nonsubjective” psychedelics, named for their lack of acute subjective effects. These nonsubjective psychedelics, if successfully created along the lines some authors have proposed, would, it is hoped, rapidly boost neuroplasticity and hypothetically would have the same therapeutic impact as their classical (hallucinogenic/subjective) counterparts (Cameron et al. 2021; Rasmussen and Olson 2022). Although nonsubjective psychedelics

remain in development with no clear therapeutic benefit having been reported—much less one that is equivalent to the benefits that have so far been associated with classic psychedelics—they are subject to considerable research and investment and therefore may come into existence before long.

In previous papers, we discussed the hypothetical scenario in which subjective and nonsubjective psychedelics turned out to have equivalent therapeutic impact, and what role the acute subjective experience might play in decisions about the default treatment to be offered (Cheung et al. 2023; Yaden, Earp, and Griffiths 2022). Although we touched on the potential *meaningfulness* of a psychedelic experience and how this might be positively valued by some patients, the debate was still grounded in concerns about the persisting effects—whether “medical” or “non-medical”—of psychedelics. However, to further investigate the question of what value psychedelic experiences may have in and of themselves, we propose here to set aside any measurable effects lasting beyond the acute subjective episode.

We will approach this question from two different angles. The first considers how psychedelic experiences might have value by contributing to the psychological richness of our lives. The second draws on the enhancement literature to highlight goods that can be obtained from the experience itself, even without attaining persisting beneficial effects. Based on these insights, along with notions of value drawn from the philosophy of aesthetics, we argue that it is reasonable to ascribe significant value to the acute subjective experience, even apart from any value that might be associated with persisting beneficial effects.

### **Intrinsic Value: Possibilities and Difficulties**

Within the literature on value, a distinction is commonly made between instrumental and intrinsic value. Although many definitions exist for intrinsic value, Dale Jamieson (2008) helpfully outlines four distinct senses in which the expression “intrinsic value” is used. In the first sense, intrinsic value is contrasted with instrumental value: what has intrinsic value is of ultimate value, while things with instrumental value have value only because they contribute to the realization of what is of intrinsic value. The second sense of the expression takes intrinsic value to be that which is necessary and sufficient for something to be of primary moral concern, or to have moral standing. For example,

sentience or perhaps self-awareness could ground intrinsic value in this sense. Third, intrinsic value could refer to the idea that the value of something depends on what is inherent in the thing itself. Of this sense, G. E. Moore (1922) writes that “to say that a kind of value is intrinsic means merely that the question whether a thing possesses it, and to what degree it possesses it, depends solely on the intrinsic nature of the thing in question” (000). Finally, the fourth sense is that what is of intrinsic value is independent of the valuers. In other words: some things would still be of value, even if no one would be around to value them.

It is entirely possible that the acute subjective effects of psychedelics (i.e., the psychedelic experience or “trip”) could be intrinsically valuable, in a number of the senses mentioned above. We can think of examples of intrinsically bad experiences, such as waking up from anesthesia during an extremely painful surgery. Even if one had no recollection of this afterwards and suffered no long-term side effects, the experience itself would arguably be undesirable due to the intrinsic badness of pain. Similarly, the acute subjective experience—assuming a generally positive or meaningful one—may present an example of an intrinsically valuable experience, in that some people might want to undergo it even if they could not remember it afterwards and there were no persisting beneficial effects.

Notably, *aesthetic* experiences may be intrinsically valuable in this sense (Reid 1931; Goldman 1990; Stecker 2006; Määtänen 2012); and psychedelic experiences are often aesthetic (Aqil and Roseman 2023). However, given the complexity and controversy that surrounds the concept of intrinsic value (does intrinsic value really exist? what things have intrinsic value?), and the difficulty of clearly delineating it from non-intrinsic forms of value, we have chosen to direct our focus in this paper elsewhere. In this way, we hope to point to less contentious forms of value that might reasonably be ascribed to the psychedelic experience.

Please note that, throughout what follows, when referring to “the” psychedelic experience, we refer to a *characteristic* psychedelic experience under relatively safe and supportive conditions. We acknowledge that some psychedelic experiences are unpleasant, frightening, or otherwise distressing or harmful, and may be negatively valued by the individual (see, e.g., Evans et al. 2023.)

### Instrumental versus Contributory Value

As previously defined, instrumental value refers to the value that something has in virtue of being a means to an end, where the end might be something that has intrinsic value (as Jamieson writes). Here, we distinguish between instrumental benefits regarding clinical outcomes (sometimes described as “medical benefits” and understood in relation to therapeutic aims) and instrumental benefits regarding nonclinical outcomes (sometimes described as “non-medical benefits” which might be valued as kind of side-effect). The former refers to persisting beneficial effects typically sought as a primary outcome of psychedelic-assisted therapy, such as symptom reduction in patients with anxiety and depression (Carhart-Harris et al. 2021; Goodwin et al. 2022; Nichols 2016). In contrast, instrumental benefits regarding nonclinical outcomes refers to benefits that can be obtained but are not sought out as a clinical outcome *per se*, such as a heightened sense or experience of meaningfulness (Jacobs et al. 2023). Both forms of instrumental value have been widely documented with psychedelics.

However, other forms of value may also be found in the acute subjective experience. One such form may be *contributory* value, which refers to the value of an object that stems from its part-whole relations. Although they may seem alike, contributory value differs from instrumental value in that the contributory value of a part cannot be determined in isolation—the whole must be considered. Take the example of a painting, as given by Leibniz (1898). A single part of a painting, such as a square patch of gray, may be ugly on its own. It may have no intrinsic or aesthetic value nor any instrumental benefits. However, that section makes the painting as a whole more beautiful, because of its relations to the other parts.

This is not a cause-and-effect relationship, but one of a part to a whole. Regarding the acute subjective experience, C. I. Lewis (1955) presents a particularly clear definition of contributory value that will help draw out the relevance of the concept to our inquiry: “Let us call the value assignable to any transitory experience not—or not merely—by reason of the quality it immediately presents but on account of its contribution to some larger whole of experience, or to life altogether, the contributory value of it” (68).

### Psychological Richness and Contributory Value

To see how the acute subjective experience of psychedelics may have contributory value, it may be useful to bring in Robert Nozick's (1974) famous thought experiment, the Experience Machine, and at the same time return to the hypothetical case of nonsubjective psychedelics. Devised as an objection to hedonism as a theory of wellbeing, Nozick describes a machine that could give us whatever pleasurable experiences we could want, which, despite being manufactured entirely by the machine and having no necessary connection to what is happening in the real world, we would be unable to distinguish from reality. He then asks us to consider whether we would prefer the machine to real life. Nozick argues that many people would choose reality over the Experience Machine, thereby showing that pleasure is not the only value that we care about, and that there is more to well-being than just our mental states. Importantly, his thought experiment shows that not all subjectively equivalent experiences are equally valuable.

Now compare the experience of taking subjective versus nonsubjective psychedelics. Even if we grant that, subsequent to the use of either type of psychedelic, *the same* persisting beneficial effects would be achieved, would there still be something missing from the use of nonsubjective psychedelics that we would value, were it present? The question represents a sort of flipped Experience Machine, where the two options appear to be objectively equivalent in their outcomes, but are experientially different. For example, Person A may take a nonsubjective psychedelic and achieve some quantifiable reduction in her symptoms. Person B takes a subjective psychedelic and achieves the same reduction. Although their outcomes are objectively the same, it may seem that Person B, by virtue of the acute subjective experience of the psychedelic, was able to benefit in some other way apart from her reduction in symptoms. Given that the persisting beneficial effects are held to be equivalent with both subjective and nonsubjective psychedelics, this thought experiment can help direct us to explore what value the acute subjective experience might have apart from its persisting beneficial effects.

Here is another thought experiment to help accentuate our thesis. Imagine two worlds, World A and World B, both with exactly the same total levels of well-being. In World A, all paintings that exist and have ever existed are Claude Monet's *Water Lilies*. In World B, our usual variation of

paintings and artists exist. In choosing between the worlds, we might think that World B is preferable, even if levels of well-being are the same in both. One reason this may be so is because diversity in our sources of well-being is important to us—we appreciate having a heterogeneous set of experiences. This argument is also alluded to in the environmental ethics literature on the value of biodiversity (see, for example, Bradley 2001).

This intuition can be further refined with another variation of this thought experiment. Consider two hypothetical sleeping pills, both of which are extremely effective at addressing insomnia. Pill X takes away one's ability to dream, while pill Y leaves dreams intact and unaffected. It is plausible to imagine that some people would still opt for pill X (which allows dreaming), even if we assume that the ability to dream makes no difference to one's well-being given the equally effective treatment for insomnia. A diversity of interesting experiences is something that many people seem to value as part of their life, even if that diversity doesn't necessarily increase persisting levels of well-being.

As one way to explain this intuition, we can turn to the idea of a psychologically rich life. Lorraine Besser and Shigehiro Oishi (2020) introduce this notion, describing the psychologically rich life as “a life characterized by complexity, in which people experience a variety of *interesting* things, and feel and appreciate a variety of deep emotions via firsthand experiences or vicarious experiences” (2020). The importance of a psychologically rich life can be observed in how we seek out a wide range of emotions, dislike boredom, and treasure the interesting in our lives. Notably, Besser and Oishi claim that these experiences do not always have to be pleasant, nor do they have to be meaningful—what matters for a psychologically rich life is the range and diversity of emotions and experiences. This range helps to introduce variety, depth, and interest in one's life. It is also important to note that the idea of a psychologically rich life as a good life is distinct from the idea of a “life of meaning” being a good life. Not all of the experiences in our life deliver meaning, nor do they always engage with something of objective value. Although this concept diverges from more traditional accounts of a “good life”, there is some preliminary empirical support for this concept: a survey by Oishi and Westgate (2022) found that between 9 and 17% of people describe their ideal life in terms of a psychologically rich life.

Recognizing a psychologically rich life as a type of good life helps us to see what value the acute subjective experience of psychedelics may have, apart from either its intrinsic (e.g., aesthetic) value or its instrumental value by way of persisting beneficial effects. Through Besser and Oishi's (2020) framework, we can view experiences that we find interesting and that allow us to experience a range of emotions as contributing to the psychological richness of our lives. The acute subjective experience of psychedelics, with its variety of emotions and altered states of consciousness, falls within this category, with its contributory value derived from being part of a psychologically rich life.

Returning to C. I. Lewis's (1955) description of contributory value, the psychedelic experience may have this value "on account of its contribution to some larger whole of experience, or to life altogether" (68). Examining the acute subjective experience through the lens of psychological richness additionally helps us to acknowledge and appreciate one of its defining characteristics: that psychedelic experiences are, characteristically, immensely interesting and in some ways unique. It is these very qualities that enable the psychedelic experience to contribute to, and be a part of, a psychologically rich life. Thus, the acute subjective experience can be ascribed value even if there are no persisting benefits to well-being.

### **An Alternative Lens: Process versus Outcome Goods**

Although we have pointed to the contributory value that the acute subjective experience may possess, an alternative way to approach this discussion about value is through a framework from the enhancement literature, as described by Rob Goodman (2010). In this literature, it is often argued that enhancement—that is, roughly, means of improving human faculties beyond what is necessary to maintain some normative level of health—could constitute a form of cheating. A classic example is the use of "smart pills" or "study drugs" in the context of a competitive classroom environment (Martin et al 2023).

However, in his paper on the ethics of enhancement, Goodman poses the question of whether all types of enhancement should be considered cheating. To answer this, he makes a distinction: the difference between process goods and outcome goods. Process goods are found in activities that are characterized by excellence in their performance, while outcome goods are the benefits that an



activity creates. Many activities have both process and outcome goods—the cooking of a meal both cultivates virtues of patience and persistence and results in a meal that can be savored. However, both are not always equally weighted: outcome goods may carry a greater weight in some activities, as when a surgeon uses cognitive enhancement to stay awake during a late-night surgery in order to save a patient’s life (Goold and Maslen 2014). More generally, on some views, certain forms of enhancement could be permissible—even if they did constitute cheating in some sense—because of the overall benefits they would bring to society.

To highlight the distinction between process and outcome goods, we can consider the example of a man who has climbed to the peak of Mount Everest by himself, versus a man who was carried to the top by a Sherpa. Although both enjoy the beautiful view at the top, it may seem as though the man who was carried has missed something crucial. This distinction can help us see why this intuition may arise, by pointing to the process goods that are attained during the climbing.

Whether process goods or outcome goods are more heavily valued, then, depends upon the activity in question. Goodman suggests that for activities where a large number of people benefit from the outcome or the activity itself is unrewarding, outcome goods can be prioritized. The case of the cognitively enhanced surgeon—or cancer researcher, say—is one such example, where a large number of people could potentially benefit from their enhanced activities. Meanwhile, activities like chess are principally characterized by their process goods: chess, although potentially enjoyable to play, does not primarily aim at producing valuable outcomes; its excellence lies the experience of playing the game.

This framework, we suggest, can be applied to the debate around subjective and nonsubjective psychedelics. Let us return to our hypothetical scenario in which subjective and nonsubjective psychedelics have been shown to produce the same outcome goods (or the same instrumental benefits). Well-being may be increased and symptoms alleviated in both cases. However, revisiting the metaphor of the hiker and Mount Everest, if the persisting beneficial effects are akin to reaching the peak of Mount Everest (outcome goods), then virtues obtained during the climb can be likened to goods attained during the acute subjective experience of psychedelics. In other words, there may be something about the *process* of obtaining certain benefits—through engagement with the

psychedelic experience itself—that may be of value to some individuals.

Such a process of engagement may take different forms. One such form may be the reflection on our lives that is often prompted or carried out. Writing on the value of reflection, Alida Liberman (2023) argues that reflection can be non-instrumentally valuable, even if no particular insights emerge: “the well-examined life is likely to be richer and more satisfying than the unexamined one” (000). This sentiment is also put forward by Socrates’ famous dictum that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” Liberman argues that even a poorly examined life is better than one that goes unexamined: the process of reflection is valuable in and of itself.

If reflection is a process good, then the acute subjective experience offers a valuable arena for reflection on one’s life and values. This is attested to in the qualitative data of psychedelic clinical trials, where participants often report gaining insight into their self-identity and values after psychedelic-assisted therapy (Noorani et al. 2018). However, returning to Liberman’s claim, even if no insights were derived, this process of reflection could still be valuable, therefore helping to highlight the value that can be found even if persisting beneficial effects do not attain. Moreover, there may be other process goods associated with psychedelic experience, such as the experience of witnessing the developing of one’s abilities. Subjective psychedelics offer an opportunity to attain these process goods compared to nonsubjective psychedelics: however, it is important to acknowledge that they may not be the only way to attain them.

By framing the acute subjective experience in terms of process and outcome goods, we may be better able to articulate what is of value in the psychedelic experience (and why it might be important to preserve the possibility for individuals to choose to undergo the psychedelic experience). In particular, it does so by highlighting the process goods that can still be obtained even if persisting beneficial effects do not occur.

However, we would like to emphasize that although we have highlighted the process goods associated with psychedelic experiences, we are not arguing that they should always be given more weight than the outcome goods. There are cases where the outcome goods of psychedelic-assisted therapy may be more highly valued or otherwise prioritized over process goods, and space should be left for individuals to make their own decisions about how they weigh these respective goods. For

example, we are not advocating for an individual who is contraindicated to undergo an acute subjective psychedelic experience (for example, due to a preexisting condition) to do so. Also, depending on their preferences, a person could place no value on reflection or may not consider richness and variety of experience to be particularly important for their life. Moreover, it is entirely possible that some of the hypothetical benefits of nonsubjective psychedelics (such as their financial accessibility) outweigh the importance of the process goods. However, by sketching out the process goods that can be associated with the acute subjective experience, we hope to have outlined another consideration for the debate between advocates of subjective and nonsubjective psychedelics, while also making the case for potential intrinsic value of psychedelic experiences in some cases.

### **Conclusion**

The ongoing development of nonsubjective psychedelics can encourage us to consider what forms of value can be found in the acute subjective experience of psychedelics, even if no persisting beneficial effects result. In addition to the potential intrinsic value associated with aesthetic experiences of various kinds, we point to two other forms of value that can reasonably be ascribed to the psychedelic experience in particular: first, the contributory value it has in relation to psychological richness, and second, the process goods that can still be attained without the persisting beneficial effects. By exploring these and other under-appreciated sources of value in psychedelic experiences, we might hope to encourage further reflection on our values, both within and beyond the medical context, that go beyond calculations of benefit and risk.

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