

## **Reflections on Albert Hofmann's Epistemology of Consciousness**

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In honor of Hofmann's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday and his legendary discovery of LSD, this essay examines his first ecstatic experience as a child. An experience which qualifies as an expression of *peak-experience* (Schroll, in press, b) and *Gaia consciousness* (Schroll, 2000), that matured into the plateau experience of his epistemology.<sup>1</sup> Understanding Hofmann's epistemology of consciousness will assist us in answering two fundamental questions. 1) How does holding onto our assumptions and presuppositions restrict humankind's ability from perceiving alternative worldviews and a multiverse of cognitive perspectives? And 2) why is psychedelic experience so essential?

We begin this inquiry by recalling Hofmann's childhood experience.

It happened on a May morning—I have forgotten the year—but I can still point to the exact spot where it occurred, on a forest path on Martinsberg above Baden, Switzerland. As I strolled through the freshly greened woods filled with bird song and lit up by the morning sun, all at once everything appeared in an uncommonly clear light. Was this something I had simply failed to notice before? Was I suddenly discovering the spring forest as it actually looked? It shone with the most beautiful radiance, speaking to the heart, as though it wanted to encompass me in its majesty. I was filled with an indescribable sensation of joy, oneness, and blissful security (Hofmann: ix-x, 1983).

### **Aha, It's A Metaphor: A Conversation with Hofmann on Epistemology**

On February 22, 1996a, at the "Worlds of Consciousness" conference, University of Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany, I had a brief conversation with Hofmann following the panel presentation "What Is the Farther Reaches of Consciousness Research" (Hofmann, 1996a). The intent of this conversation was to point out to Hofmann the limitations of his epistemology that he presented during the aforementioned panel; specifically his view that we need to explore the horizons of our thought with the mind of a child. I knew what Hofmann was attempting to express; he was seeking to convey the need to be continually watchful of the power our presuppositions have in creating the conceptual narratives of science. Indeed, it is important to remember that the theories guiding our scientific investigations are only presuppositions, or conceptual narratives that we ourselves create.

I agree with Hofmann's epistemological stance, but, due to the barrier of language, I failed to find the necessary means to communicate the need for a minor refinement of this analogy. Hence, in accordance with Pasteur's maximum that "chance favors the prepared mind," which combines technical knowledge and intuition, it is important to proceed with our scientific inquiry using the mind of a child. Finding the means to communicate this refinement became my personal koan throughout the next four days.

On February 25, 1996b, I was given a second opportunity to discuss Hofmann's view of epistemology with him. Handing Hofmann a lighter, I explained I wanted to follow-up on our previous conversation with the aid of a brief thought-experiment. With the lighter in his hands, I asked Hofmann to show me how it worked. Try as he might, with his large thumbs fumbling helplessly, he found it impossible to make the lighter work. The look of desperation was very apparent on his face. Finally I told him it was a "child proof" lighter, and that someone who approached life with the complete naivete` of a child lacks the basic technique to make it work.

Hofmann's eyes opened wide, and then exclaimed: "Aha, it's a metaphor." He was beaming, like someone who had just seen a vision or had just solved the riddle of a koan. He then asked if the lighter was for him. I said it was my only one and he handed it back. Seeing the look of disappointment on his face, I felt around in my pocket, discovering another child proof lighter (this one with a semi-naked women on it), which I gave to him. Hofmann smiled and commented on her beauty. I walked out of Stadhalle (where the conference was held) with him to where his taxi was waiting. He got in. I then tapped on the window (which he rolled down) and said: "The lighter is a metaphor for *the techniques of consciousness*, which will be one of my next essays." He nodded, repeating my phrase. I did not realize that this understanding which Hofmann grasped in an instant it would require several years to articulate to others.

#### **About a Year Later In Leipzig: Hofmann Recalls His Childhood Peak-Experience**

On July 15, 1997, I received a letter from Michael Szukaj, M.D., a psychiatrist in private practice in Munster, Germany. I had sent a letter to Szukaj a couple months after my attendance at the 1996 "Worlds of Consciousness" conference, which included my former conversation with Hofmann—a story that Szukaj has since told several times to

his colleagues in Germany. Thus Szukaj knew that I would appreciate the significance of his conversation with Hofmann, which took place about a year later in Leipzig, Germany:

[Albert] Hofmann was sitting at a table by himself in the café of a large hotel during a conference on consciousness in Leipzig, where I had come to have a coffee while preparing my speech. Hofmann (who was reading a copy of Aldous Huxley's book *Island*) recognized me and asked me to sit down. We talked for about an hour. During our conversation, he eluded to a very interesting question that I had always had regarding my work, but had never before had the courage or opportunity to ask: *Why was he prepared to do further research after having gone through the physiologically remarkable, but psychologically bizarre accidental LSD experience on April 16, 1943? Hofmann replied that he had continued his research on the problem [of ergot alkaloids] because his 1943 LSD experience had reminded him of a very rare moment in his childhood, where he had had the same kind of special perception.* Therefore it was not so much fear that he experienced that day [in 1943] but an intense fascination with the unknown.

Isn't this a wonderfully complementary story to the conversation that you had with Hofmann when you discussed your lighter metaphor with him: that *without having encountered (and still being able to remember) a similar kind of [transpersonal] experience during his childhood, humankind may never have truly understood the chemical structure of LSD*—[despite the present social controversy and associated political resistance that we now face blocking its continued investigation] (Szukaj, July 7, 1997, italics mine).

### **Observing Self and Object Self: Why Both Are Necessary for a Complete Epistemology of Consciousness**

Hofmann's reference to "the 'inborn faculty of visionary experience' [that] we all possess as children but lose as we mature" (Horgan: 155, 2003), or the epistemology of the "child's mind," is what Arthur Deikman has referred to as the observing self.

The observing self is the trans-parent center. . . . [It] is not part of the object world formed by our thoughts and sensory-perceptions because, literally, it has no limits; everything else does. . . . [The observing self cannot] be observed but remains forever apart from the contents of consciousness. . . . the observing self is featureless; it cannot be affected by the world any more than a mirror can be affected by the images it reflects. . . ., the observing self has no elements. . . . It is not a question of a searchlight illuminating one area while another is dark, but [is an undifferentiated aspect] of the light itself. . . . It follows that a different type of knowing is involved, one we must designate as intuitive, or direct, knowing—knowing by being that which is known. We *are* awareness, and that is why we cannot observe it; we

cannot detach ourselves from it because it is the core experience of self (Deikman: 94-103, 1982).

But this epistemological perspective has its limits. If, for example, Hofmann had not learned the basic techniques of chemical titration and analysis—tool use—he would never have been able to experimentally discover LSD. Hofmann realized the limits of this epistemology through his failure to know the basic technique to operate a childproof lighter. This need for technique to know how to manipulate the physical objects of this world is what Deikman has referred to as the object self.

Initially, the object self is necessary for psychological as well as physical survival. Indeed, failure to establish a sense of one's own boundaries leads to retarded development and psychosis. However, the object self, once created, does not give up control and finally dominates consciousness. The tyranny of the object self has unfortunate consequences, for we are more than objects and have needs the object mode cannot fulfill (Deikman: 71, 1982).

It is therefore the tyranny of the object self that Hofmann is concerned about, seeing the need for us to free our consciousness from its grip; because once created the object self dominates our consciousness and refuses to give up control. This is why psychedelic experience is so essential—we must use heroic methods like LSD to free ourselves from the dominance of the object self. Mainstream science has wisely avoided this discussion, because addressing it invites serious questions regarding the limits of reason and opens up the question regarding the nature of physical reality. Begging the question,

### **What Is Reality?**

This question is rhetorical in the same way the bumper sticker slogan “question authority” is rhetorical. People drawn to the slogan question authority most likely do not possess any kind of authority. How many authors or leaders of any group do you know would proclaim, doubt everything I am saying? Thus the “question authority” slogan implies a fundamental contradiction—question authority—until the views that represent the dogma which your group believes become part of our mainstream consensus reality. Likewise, “what is reality” is a question that invites a rhetorical process of self-reflection regarding the infrastructure of ideas that hold together our paradigmatic assumptions. In other words, I am inviting us to raise questions about EuroAmerican science’s assumptions about reality.

A more specific way of initiating this rhetorical process of self-reflection would be to ask, how many of you believe in quantum theory? How many of you believe in spirits? How many of you believe in the Easter Bunny? All of these are questions that help us to create belief systems. One of these questions is derived of empirical facts, that may or may not, be experiential. One question includes experiential facts that we have not as yet been able to confirm empirically, and one question is based purely on a folk belief that is composed of social facts, which can be studied using objective methods of rational analysis. Do you know the difference? People can believe in things that are not real, like the Easter Bunny. This makes them what Durkheim referred to as a “social fact,” which are useful in the creation of folk beliefs that can become part of a larger explanatory belief system, but this is totally different than a physical fact. It is also the difference between superstition and empirical fact. The empirical facts of observations in physics led to theories about subatomic particles, but the physical detection of subatomic particles are beyond human threshold limitations of sensation and perception. Shamans tell us they can journey to a spirit world, but this spirit world has yet to be confirmed empirically. The Easter Bunny is purely a folk belief. And the level of reality associated with the placebo effect—that may account for such things as Voodoo Death—seems to transcend all of the previous examples (Schroll, 2005).

**Why Psychedelic Experience Is So Essential:  
An Analogy Demonstrating How Presuppositions Prevent Our Perception  
Of Alternative Worldviews**

We are now prepared to examine a more detailed reiteration of my lighter analogy whose inquiry will enable us to answer the questions Hofmann’s epistemology raises. 1) How do the assumptions and presuppositions we hold about the nature of reality restrict humankind’s ability from perceiving alternative worldviews and a multiverse of cognitive perspectives? And 2) why is psychedelic experience so essential?

Let us begin by assuming that all-disposable butane lighters work by requiring us to turn a notched metal wheel with our thumb. This requires the following technique. The turning of the wheel grinds a flint, producing sparks, which ignites the butane. People that are familiar with using butane lighters soon learn the flint-stone lasts longer than the butane. Thus, if someone repeatedly turns the wheel, producing sparks, and the butane does not ignite, we can conclude (based on past experience) that the lighter is out of

butane and it is time to replace it. Similarly, if the wheel that grinds the flint-stone does not turn, we will conclude (based on past experience) that this mechanism is broken and that it is now time to throw the lighter away.

Childproof lighters, however, require additional technical knowledge to operate. For most of us, our initial encounter with childproof lighters usually produces an experience of slight irritation and befuddlement, such as the example demonstrated by Hofmann. In other words, we are inconvenienced; our time is being taken up. But more importantly we are forced to reexamine our previous assumptions (our *Weltanschauung*) in order to acquire the habits associated with learning this new technique. Because, in addition to the previous procedures necessary to operate a butane lighter, some childproof lighters require us to press a button or turn a switch, which opens a valve that temporarily releases the butane. If we attempt to operate the childproof lighter based on our previous presuppositions, the wheel grinding the flint-stone will still work; that is, repeatedly turning the grinding wheel with our thumb will produce sparks, but because we have not opened the valve to release the butane, we are unable to produce fire. Therefore, based on our previous presuppositions of how butane lighters operate, we will conclude that the butane has been used-up and it is now time to throw the lighter away. This conclusion is, however, incorrect, and requires an expanded or revised *weltanschauung* to understand.

Caveats to this example include other models of childproof lighters that have slightly different mechanisms (and require slightly different operational techniques), where we cannot simply turn the grinding wheel with our thumb, but must first push the wheel down in order to strike the flint. This is the kind of lighter that Hofmann found so difficult to operate, *because he lacked the necessary technique*. Based on our past experience with butane lighters, we will conclude that the grinding wheel mechanism is broken, and that the lighter now needs to be thrown away. Here again, this conclusion is incorrect, whereby we can see that childproof lighters present a challenge to our previous presuppositions, or, as I said earlier, our *Weltanschauung* about how lighters operate.

To properly operate a childproof lighter we must learn a new technique (break free of our previous enculturation, conformity, or complacency), which necessitates a paradigm shift in our knowledge. Learning this new technique necessitates breaking our habits of

cognition associated with the proper operation of a lighter. Breaking our cognitive habits requires insight, which is a function of consciousness associated with the observing self.

### **Resume`**

This essay has sought to clearly articulate and defend the thesis that holding onto our assumptions about the limits of physical reality restricts us from perceiving alternative worldviews and a multiverse of cognitive perspectives. In terms of human cognition, we learned that during the formation of our personality structure our presuppositions become restricted because of what Deikman referred to as the object self. Although essential in the formation of a healthy personality, the object self eventually dominates consciousness and prevents our perception of alternative worldviews and a multiverse of cognitive perspectives. In other words our understanding of technique, tool use and object manipulation of the physical world needs to be balanced with intuition. Object manipulation involves our learned knowledge of the past to the present--the actual world. Intuition involves our ability to transcend the limitations of our presuppositions about the known physical world in favor of the choices that we could make to shape our future.

In order to break free of the habits of cognition associated with the object self (as I pointed out using the specific example of learning the proper technique to operate a childproof lighter), demonstrates why psychedelic experience is so essential. We must use heroic methods like LSD to free ourselves from the dominance of the object self, that we associate with the consensus reality of normal consciousness, and liberate ourselves from the habits of cognition. In sum, Hofmann's legacy of LSD can be seen as a wonder drug that has given us the freedom to express primordial visions in this age of technology (Schroll, in press, a).

### **Notes**

1. Maslow's investigation of *peak* and *plateau* experiences can be found in several of his publications. Maslow pointed out that descriptions of peak-experiences using scientific language only succeed with people that know from experience (like Hofmann's) what you are trying to say. Peak experiences are the onset of a cognitive clarity of our undifferentiated unity with everything which is, that fills us simultaneously with pride and humility. Plateau experiences refer to the way our personality evolves new forms of expressing this cognitive clarity as a

character trait. Whereas Gaia consciousness is an experience of our systemic relationship with the Earth (Schroll, in press, b).

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