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[Muzamil Hussain](#) *

Posted Date: 25 April 2024

doi: 10.20944/preprints202404.1664.v1

Keywords: Psychedelics; Ego Dissolution; Self-Transcendence; Interconnectedness; Deep Ecology; Environmental Philosophy; Consciousness Studies



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Article

Dissolving the Self, Embracing the Earth: A Philosophical Exploration of Psychedelics, Self-Transcendence, and Environmental Connection

Muzamil Hussain

Indira Gandhi National Open University-New Delhi; muzaim76@gmail.com

Abstract: The experience of ego dissolution and self-transcendence induced by psychedelic substances offers a profound challenge to our conventional understanding of the self and our relationship with the natural world. This paper delves into the philosophical underpinnings and implications of this phenomenon, exploring how the temporary breakdown of ego boundaries during a psychedelic experience may foster a sense of profound interconnectedness with nature. Drawing from Western and Eastern philosophical traditions, as well as recent insights from neuroscience and consciousness studies, we examine the potential of psychedelic-induced self-transcendence to catalyze a shift in our perspectives on the human-nature relationship. The paper investigates the philosophical implications of this experience, including its resonance with deep ecological philosophies and its potential to inspire more ecocentric ethical frameworks. Furthermore, we explore the possible practical implications of fostering a sense of ecological connectedness through psychedelics, such as promoting environmentally sustainable behaviors and addressing the pressing challenges of climate change and ecological degradation. Ultimately, this exploration highlights the value of engaging with altered states of consciousness as a means to reconsider our place within the intricate web of life on Earth.

Keywords: psychedelics; ego dissolution; self-transcendence; interconnectedness; deep ecology; environmental philosophy; consciousness studies

Introduction

The notion of an individual, autonomous self has been one of the most enduring and consequential constructs in Western philosophy and culture. From Descartes' famous declaration "I think, therefore I am" to Kant's transcendental conception of the self as a necessary condition for the possibility of experience, the idea of a unified subjective "I" has profoundly shaped modern understandings of consciousness, agency, and human nature. This postulated self has become the locus of human identity, the supposed command center from which we think, act, and author our existence as independent beings.

Yet across diverse wisdom traditions and more recent strands of philosophy and science, this conventional notion of the self as a solid, abiding, and autonomous entity has been called radically into question. Many of the world's spiritual and contemplative paths have long recognized the self or ego as a kind of functional metaphysical fiction – a conceptual overlay that obscures the fundamentally interdependent, impermanent, and boundless nature of reality. From Buddhist concepts of anatta or "not-self" to Advaita Vedanta's non-dual teachings, self-transcendence has been upheld as the key to liberation from suffering and the experiential actualization of humanity's ultimate connectedness with all existence.

Within Western philosophy, thinkers like Hume, Nietzsche, and the phenomenologists have mounted influential challenges to the Cartesian idea of the self as an immutable, perceiving subject separate from objects in the world. For Hume, the self was nothing more than "a bundle of different perceptions" without any abiding essence. Nietzsche too decried the "superstition of the subject" and

worked to dissolve the fiction of a unified, wilful ego in control. And with the phenomenological lens, the self was reconceived as an inextricable node within the worldly scene of embodied, situated “being-in-the-world.”

Now a new paradigm is emerging from the fertile intersections of neuroscience, consciousness research, and the renaissance of psychedelic inquiry – one that offers a uniquely direct experiential understanding of the permeable, constructed nature of selfhood and the human mind’s profound interconnectedness with reality at large. The phenomenon of “ego dissolution” or the temporary breakthrough of non-dual awareness has been widely reported as a key feature of the transformative psychedelic experience. Catalyzed by compounds like psilocybin, LSD, and DMT, this dissipating of the subjective “I” is often accompanied by a sense of melting into the unified ground of being, a dissolution of perceived boundaries between self and world.

Such an experience, while shattering our everyday sense of self, reveals the self to be more of a conceptual object than an irreducible subjective essence. As the metaphor of being a skin-encapsulated ego gives way, one may feel themselves not just symbolically but experientially intertwined with the pulsating patterns, flows, and materialities of the living Earth at every level. Rather than some fixed subjective vantage, the experiencing locus becomes better described as a constantly morphing process embedded within the dynamic whole.

Of particular significance is how this state of ego dissolution and boundary transcendence appears inextricably linked to experiences of profound connection, unity, and reverence towards the natural world and all life. From the contemplative phenomenological accounts to the latest brain imaging studies, psychedelic-induced ego dissolution is consistently associated with feelings of being profoundly interwoven into the sacred miracle of existence, with Nature in its awe-inspiring complexity revealed as one’s own primordial source and current. There is an encompassing feeling-sense of the self as deeply interconnected with and inextricable from the grand evolved systems and processes of the living Earth.

It is this potential of psychedelics to radically reconfigure self-world boundaries and facilitate unitive experiences of deep ecological embeddedness that will be the central focus of this philosophical exploration. What are the philosophical underpinnings and implications of this shift in consciousness? How might dissolving the conceptual edifice of an isolated self, allow for more expansive ways of relating to and co-existing with the natural world? Could the non-dual awareness unveiled through psychedelics contribute to more biocentric worldviews and sustainable environmental ethics and behaviors? These are some of the key questions that will guide our inquiry as we delve into this deeply profound and potentially transformative area of human experience.

Deconstructing the Self: Philosophical Perspectives

The roots of Western philosophy’s deeply ingrained notion of the self as an autonomous, enduring subject or “I” can be traced back to the influential works of René Descartes. His famous statement “I think, therefore I am” (cogito ergo sum) laid the foundations for a mind-body dualism that continues to shape much of modern thought. For Descartes, the immaterial mind or conscious self was conceived as a fundamental and indubitable metaphysical reality – the one undeniable truth that could withstand his systematic doubting of all other beliefs. This Cartesian cogito established the individual self or ego as the locus of consciousness, reason, and existence itself.

However, this notion of an essential, unified self has been repeatedly challenged and deconstructed across the Western philosophical tradition. David Hume offered one of the earliest and most influential critiques, arguing against the idea of the self as a singular, abiding entity. In his *Treatise on Human Nature*, Hume asserts:

“For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other...I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception.”

For Hume, the self is ultimately “nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions” without any underlying substance or unchanging essence. It is a convenient fiction constructed by

the mind's penchant for establishing constant, identifiable objects from the transient flow of sense impressions and mental phenomena.

This critique of the Cartesian self was radicalized further by later thinkers like Friedrich Nietzsche, who sought to unmask and dismantle the metaphysical "superstition" of an autonomous willing subject. Through his penetrating genealogical analyses, Nietzsche unveiled the self or "I" as a relatively recent linguistic construction and interpretive effect rather than any foundational metaphysical truth. As he proclaims in *Twilight of the Idols*:

"There is no 'being' behind the doing, acting, becoming; 'the doer' has simply been added to the deed by the imagination—the doing-itself is everything."

With the existential phenomenologists like Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, we see yet another profound reconceptualization of selfhood and subjectivity. Rejecting the Cartesian view of the self as a detached, self-present thinking substance, phenomenology re-situated the self within the dynamic context of "being-in-the-world." The self or subject was no longer a fixed, isolatable entity but an open field of embodied, embedded engagement and concerned involvement with its worldly surroundings.

From these various philosophical perspectives, the foundational Western postulate of the self as a solid, sovereign, and self-contained locus of identity, perception, and volition becomes strained and tenuous at best. We're left with a more processual, interdependent, and fundamentally permeable notion of selfhood in constant flux and co-constitution with the broader field of lived experience.

These critical developments opened up fertile space for a pragmatic re-evaluation of the deep-seated cultural narratives and social practices rooted in Cartesian individualism and human/nature dualism. If the autonomous self is more accurately understood as a constantly re-negotiated process without ultimate essence, what becomes of our legacy philosophical frameworks and ethical systems premised on this very conception? How might a more dissolved, open, and ecologically embedded model of self and subjectivity inform new ways of relating to and co-existing with the living Earth system?

Psychedelics and Ego Dissolution

Psychedelic substances, such as lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), psilocybin (the active compound in "magic mushrooms"), and N,N-dimethyltryptamine (DMT), have long been associated with profound alterations in consciousness, including a sense of ego dissolution or a breakdown of the subjective self. This phenomenon has been extensively documented in both scientific literature and first-hand accounts of psychedelic experiences (Letheby & Gerrans, 2017; Pollan, 2018).

The neurobiological mechanisms underlying ego dissolution are not yet fully understood, but research suggests that psychedelics may disrupt the normal functioning of the default mode network (DMN), a neural network involved in self-referential processing and the maintenance of a stable sense of self (Carhart-Harris et al., 2012; Carhart-Harris & Friston, 2019). By disrupting the DMN and altering the activity patterns in brain regions associated with self-processing, psychedelics may temporarily dissolve the boundaries between the self and the external world, leading to a profound sense of unity and interconnectedness.

Importantly, this breakdown of the self is often accompanied by a sense of awe, wonder, and deep reverence for the natural world. Individuals undergoing psychedelic experiences frequently report feeling a profound connection with nature, a sense of being part of a larger, interconnected whole (Pollan, 2018; Griffiths et al., 2006). This experience of self-transcendence and ecological embeddedness challenges the deeply ingrained Western notion of human separateness from and dominion over the natural world.

Philosophical Implications: Embracing the Earth

The potential implications of this psychedelic-induced experience of self-transcendence and ecological connectedness are vast and far-reaching. From a philosophical perspective, it calls into question the very foundations of our modern, industrialized societies, which are built upon a

worldview that upholds the primacy of the individual self and its perceived separation from the natural environment.

By dissolving the boundaries of the self and fostering a sense of oneness with the Earth, psychedelic experiences offer a glimpse into a radically different mode of being – one that is deeply embedded in the natural world, rather than separate from it. This perspective resonates with the philosophies of deep ecology and ecopsychology, which emphasize the intrinsic value of all life forms and the importance of recognizing our interdependence with the broader ecological systems that sustain us (Naess, 1973; Roszak, 1992).

Furthermore, this experience of self-transcendence and ecological connection challenges the anthropocentric worldview that has dominated Western thought, which places human beings at the center of existence and treats the natural world as a resource to be exploited for human benefit. By dissolving the boundaries of the self, psychedelics offer a glimpse into a consciousness that is fundamentally interconnected with the Earth, inviting us to reconsider our relationship with the natural world and our responsibilities towards it.

Potential Implications for Environmental Sustainability

Beyond the philosophical implications, the experience of self-transcendence and ecological connectedness induced by psychedelics may also have practical implications for promoting environmentally sustainable behaviors and addressing the pressing challenges of climate change and ecological degradation.

Research has shown that individuals who report a sense of connectedness with nature are more likely to engage in pro-environmental behaviors and express greater concern for environmental issues (Mayer & Frantz, 2004; Nisbet et al., 2009). By fostering a sense of unity and interdependence with the natural world, psychedelic experiences may have the potential to cultivate a deeper appreciation for the Earth and a stronger commitment to protecting and preserving its delicate ecosystems.

Moreover, the experience of self-transcendence and the recognition of our interconnectedness with all life forms may inspire a shift in our ethical frameworks, moving beyond an anthropocentric perspective and towards a more ecocentric or biocentric ethic that recognizes the intrinsic value of all living beings and the importance of maintaining ecological balance and biodiversity (Naess, 1973; Curry, 2011).

It is important to note, however, that the relationship between psychedelic experiences and environmental attitudes and behaviors is complex and multifaceted. While some studies have suggested a positive correlation between psychedelic use and pro-environmental attitudes (Forstmann & Sagioglou, 2017; Studerus et al., 2022), other factors such as cultural context, individual differences, and the overall framing and integration of the psychedelic experience may also play significant roles.

Nonetheless, the potential of psychedelics to foster a sense of self-transcendence and ecological connectedness offers a compelling avenue for further exploration and research, as we grapple with the urgent need to cultivate a more sustainable and harmonious relationship between humanity and the natural world.

Discussion

The phenomenon of psychedelic-induced ego dissolution and self-transcendence offers a truly radical re-visioning of the nature of selfhood and our relationship to the broader ecological systems that sustain all life on Earth. By temporarily disrupting the neural processes that construct and reinforce our subjective sense of being a separate, bounded self, these substances reveal experiential glimpses of a consciousness intimately interwoven with the natural world. The dissolution of ego allows for a direct felt-sense of profound interconnectedness – a merging of self and world into one seamless, dynamically unfolding whole.

Such an experience stands in stark contrast to the dominant Western philosophical tradition stemming from Descartes' "I think, therefore I am" – a tradition that has effectively enshrined the

autonomous individual as the locus of consciousness and agency. This Cartesian dualism between mind and body/world has profoundly shaped modern conceptions of the self while simultaneously conditioning a sense of separateness and alienation from nature. The psychedelic dissolution of self-other boundaries reveals this constructed divide as a kind of functional illusion generated by neural and cognitive processes.

In many ways, the mystical experience of self-transcendence and felt-unity with the Earth resonates more deeply with Eastern philosophical perspectives that have long de-emphasized the primacy of individual selfhood. Buddhist concepts of anatta or “no-self,” for instance, view the subjective sense of being a solid, enduring self as a false reification – a byproduct of clinging to the transient stream of physical and mental phenomena. From this vantage, the ego is ultimately an insubstantial mirage obscuring the interdependent, impermanent nature of all things.

Similarly, the notion of “self-transcendence” evokes the deep ecological philosophy of Arne Naess, which calls for a fundamental re-evaluation of human-nature relations and a recognition of our intrinsic connection to the ecological landscapes in which we are embedded. By facilitating a direct experience of this embeddedness, psychedelics may offer a powerful catalyst for reorienting our anthropocentric worldviews towards a more ecocentric ethic that recognizes the inherent worth of all lifeforms.

Of course, this radical perspective shift stands in tension with many of the deeply entrenched values, practices, and power structures of modern industrialized society – a society predicated on the primacy of the rational, self-interested individual operating in a subjugated natural world that exists as a resource to be extracted and exploited. The disillusionment of ego and radical ecological intimacy revealed by psychedelic states thus contains a potent critical challenge to the philosophical and cultural foundations of Western selfhood, capitalism, and unsustainable environmental practices.

It is here that we must exercise prudence in how these experiences are contextualized and integrated. Without an awareness of the profound philosophical implications involved, psychedelic ego dissolution could be dismissed as mere hallucination or subjective distortion rather than a legitimate unveiling of the contingent, constructed nature of everyday selfhood and human separateness from nature. Conversely, framed properly through the lenses of wisdom traditions and ecological philosophies, these states may reveal invaluable insights into how to cultivate more grounded, sustainable, reverential modes of being and co-existence with our planetary home.

Indeed, far from threatening authentic selfhood, the temporary egoic dissolution catalyzed by psychedelics may in fact reveal a more expansive, holistic mode of being-in-the-world – a way of existing as a fluid node in the dynamic interconnected systems of life, rather than a falsely sealed-off and isolated self. From this perspective, the self is not negated or annihilated, but opened into new dimensions of interconnected existence and ecological reciprocity.

Conclusion

The experience of self-transcendence and ecological connectedness facilitated by psychedelics poses profound challenges to conventional Western philosophical and cultural notions of the self and humanity’s relationship with the natural world. By temporarily dissolving the boundaries of the subjective ego, these substances offer a glimpse into a radically different mode of being – one characterized by a sense of profound interconnectedness, where the self is experienced as deeply embedded within the intricate web of life on Earth rather than separate from it.

This phenomenon resonates strongly with the philosophies of Eastern traditions like Buddhism, which have long espoused a perspective of “no-self” or anatta, as well as the principles of deep ecology that recognize the inherent worth of all life forms and reject anthropocentric perspectives. The implications of such a consciousness shift are vast, challenging the foundations of Western individualism and human exceptionalism that have contributed to many of the environmental crises we currently face.

By fostering experiences of unity and oneness with nature, psychedelics may catalyze a fundamental reorientation of how we view ourselves in relation to the Earth’s ecosystems. Such a shift could inspire more ecocentric ethical frameworks extending moral consideration to all living

beings, as well as a deeper appreciation for ecological preservation and sustainability. While more research is still needed, the potential of these substances to promote pro-environmental values, behaviors, and policies is compelling.

At the same time, it is crucial to approach psychedelic-induced ego dissolution and self-transcendence with prudence, care, and contextualization. These are powerful experiences that can be destabilizing or even traumatic without proper preparation, setting, and integration practices. Broader cultural narratives and worldviews will undoubtedly shape and filter how such non-ordinary states of consciousness are understood and applied.

Ultimately, the philosophical and pragmatic value of engaging with consciousness-altering psychedelics lies in their ability to shatter rigid constructs and open up new vistas of experience, perception, and relation to self and world. By dissolving the illusory boundaries of the ego-self, we may find opportunities to reimagine more sustainable, harmonious, and reverent ways of coexisting with this breathtakingly diverse and interconnected planet we call home.

As we stand on the precipice of ecological and existential crossroads, embracing diverse modes of consciousness – including those that transcend our conventional sense of self – could unlock novel perspectives and pathways forward. The dissolution of self, far from being a threat, may in fact be the key to more deeply embracing the Earth and all beings with whom we share this journey.

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