

Psychedelic Research: The French Revolution



Alexandre Lehmann, Ph.D.

<http://hallucinations.risc.cnrs.fr/symposium2008/eng>

with

Juan C. González, Ph.D.

lehmann_alexandre@yahoo.fr
entedement@gmail.com

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MANY SIGNS suggest that there is a worldwide rebirth of psychedelic research; a new era where scientific facts, therapeutic benefits, social maturity and a better understanding of the traditional and sacred uses of psychoactive plants have started dissipating prejudices about what have simplistically and erroneously been called 'drugs'. Psychedelic research is indeed opening revolutionary venues in many fields, and it is in an equally revolutionary context that the first Paris Spring Symposium on Hallucinations in Philosophy and Cognitive Science took place last March. This is to be taken literally too, for the Symposium took place in the historical Couvent des Cordeliers (in the Latin Quarter, at the heart of Paris), where the French revolutionaries used to hold their secret meetings.

The Couvent is now part of the Université de Paris School of Medicine, and, over four days, it hosted a group of researchers, students, practitioners and freelancers for a series of truly multidisciplinary scientific talks and roundtable discussions around the topic of hallucinations and modified states of consciousness. Within the general framework set up by philosophy and cognitive science, talks and discussions dealt with issues and subjects as diverse as clinical therapy, society, psychology, visionary art, shamanism, phenomenology, neuroscience, cognitive models, psychiatry, anthropology, and pharmacology.

The Symposium took place two days after the World Psychedelic Forum in Basel, which allowed for several international guests to be present. The atmosphere was academic, yet relaxed and very pleasant. It was a delight to hold such an event in France, where psychedelic research is very timid and underrepresented at best.

Some Background

In spite of early efforts by pioneers such as Roger Heim and Robert Goutarel (who, respectively, studied psilocybin mushrooms and iboga in the 1950s), there is currently no psychedelic research in France. Given this, as a student in Cogni-

tive Science and a MAPS member, I was amazed when, in 2006, I heard about Juan González's Paris research seminars on hallucinations in the context of Philosophy and Cognitive Science. Attending these seminars was a real pleasure; it was the first time that I could use my scientific knowledge to share and discuss with others ideas about altered states of consciousness and how they relate with theories of perception and cognition.

I was all the more surprised when I learned that he was one of Francisco Varela's last Ph.D. students, since the enactive framework set forth by Francisco and his colleagues has been an inspiring theoretical source for me. Juan, who is a professor of Philosophy and Cognitive Science at Morelos State University (Mexico), was a guest professor for two consecutive years at the School of High Studies in Social Sciences (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales) in Paris, and this is what made those seminars and workshops possible. That was the starting point of an ongoing scientific collaboration and friendship, which culminated in the joint organization of the 2008 Spring Symposium.

Theoretical Issues and Scientific Goals

Altered states of consciousness and, more particularly, perceptual hallucinations, have puzzled philosophers and scientists interested in cognition for a long time. These "abnormal" states of consciousness have often been evoked in order to, among other things, support philosophical skepticism, provide foundations for the idea of veridical perception, support indirect theories of perception, study the nature and mechanisms of consciousness, help set criteria for mental-health evaluation, explore therapies in clinical psychology, inspire the work of artists and, last but not least, understand what William James called "the varieties of religious experience."

Nevertheless, as of today, the precise phenomenology of these states remains widely unknown to the philosophical and scientific communities. Moreover, the cur-

rent theories of hallucinatory experience seem to be unsuited or outdated, starting with the definition given by Esquirol in the 19th century --and still widely used-- according to which a hallucination is “a false perception or a perception with no object.” Furthermore, relevant data about hallucinations are spread out across a rich variety of disciplines, such as literature, history, ethnobotany, psychiatry, anthropology, psychology, cognitive neuroscience, philosophy and art.

The goals of the symposium were the same as those of Juan’s original seminars and workshops in the past years—to approach the hallucinatory experience, within a transdisciplinary framework, in order to:

1. better understand its precise phenomenology,
2. test the validity of epistemological arguments, and of specific stances within Theory of Perception,
3. review existing empirical studies on the topic, and
4. inquire about the nature of knowledge and of consciousness in (post)modern philosophy and cognitive science.

Since we are interested in the nature and mechanisms of perception and cognition, and, specifically, in the distinction between ‘veridical’ and ‘hallucinatory’ experiences --and because of certain methodological advantages-- we especially focus on the accounts of those who have experimented with psychoactive substances, and on the empirical studies concerning the use of those substances.

Psychedelics thus play an important role in our approach since they offer reliable means of inducing temporary (and, to an extent, controlled) altered states of consciousness in healthy subjects. Moreover, they also turn out to be a great tool for current consciousness research in cognitive science.

Debriefing the 2008 Symposium

After presenting a summary of previous work and a general overview of the Symposium, we had the pleasure to host an introductory talk by Pierre Etevenon, a French psychedelic research pioneer in neuropsychopharmacology. This retired head of a research laboratory at the French National Institute for Health and Medical Research (INSERM) did part of his training at the University of Princeton, under the supervision of Humphrey Osmond. Then, at the Hospital Sainte-Anne in Paris, he studied the effect of many psychoactives, including psilocybin mushrooms as well as a THC-based jam on a group of psychiatrists.

We also had the pleasure of hosting Rick Doblin and

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Valerie Mojeiko as speakers. Rick gave an overview of current MAPS research projects, and Valerie presented both the results of a study concerning an ibogaine-treatment against drug-addiction and the psychedelic emergency projects at Burning Man and Boom festival. The final talk of the first day was given by Markus Werning, from Düsseldorf University, who introduced, from a philosophical point of view, the theoretical problems raised by the hallucinatory experience and how it challenges the representational approaches to perception. We ended the day with a welcome drink near Notre-Dame de Paris.

For the following day only, we left the Couvent des Cordeliers and held the talks in a very prestigious and symbolic venue--the French Ministry of Research.

Jean Petitot, from the École Polytechnique, presented a model of spontaneous neural activations, using neurophysiological data about the visual cortex combined with mathematical tools. This model accounts for the geometric visual patterns induced by mescaline that Klüver described in the first-half of the 20th century.

Then Claire Petitmengin, a phenomenologist from CREA (epistemological studies lab in Paris), spoke about the microdynamics of the perceptive experience and presented a neuro-phenomenological method of first-person data collection, stressing the importance of a special training for self-observation in scientists studying consciousness. A longtime practitioner of meditation, she showed that these techniques of inner awareness share many similarities with Tibetan meditation practices. She concluded by evoking the phenomenology of the ayahuasca experience, referring mainly to the works of Benny Shanon, who incidentally was the next speaker. Benny Shanon, psychologist and philosopher from The Hebrew University, was kind enough to come all the way from Israel. He gave an exciting and comprehensive presentation entitled “Ayahuasca Visions: A Program for Cognitive Research.” This second day was closed by a presentation on trance and hallucinations by Dennis Wier, from the Trance Research Foundation.

On the third day, anthropologist Sébastien Baud, from Strasbourg University, discussed the use of four different psychotropic plants among the Awajün Jivaro indians from Peru, namely ayahuasca, tobacco, coca and the San Pedro cactus. He was followed by another anthropologist, Bia Labate --founder of Brazilian interdisciplinary psychoactive research group NEIP-- who gave a special presentation entitled “What Can Native Uses of Ayahuasca Lead Us to Think About Our Concepts of Hallucination and Drugs?”

Then Nicolas Franck, a psychiatrist from the Institute of Cognitive Science in Lyon, presented a neurocognitive approach to verbal hallucinations in schizophrenic patients. The afternoon hosted the colorful presentation of Canadian visionary artist Laurence Caruana: "Entheogens and Visionary Art." The final talk took place in the form of a discussion between Dutch movie director Jan Kounen (famous for his film on the ayahuasca experience *Other Worlds*) and the attendance, around the nature and uses of ayahuasca and other master plants of traditional Shipibo-Conibo medicine.

The last day was dedicated to roundtable discussions gathering experts from several fields. The first roundtable gathered Pierre Etevenon, Spanish psychologist and psychotherapist Manuel Villaescusa, French neuro-psycho-pharmacologist Frederick Bois-Mariage and Finnish neuroscientist Levente Moro around the topic "Empirical Sciences and Subjectivity." The second roundtable discussion focused on "Philosophy & Hallucinations" with Benny Shanon, Markus Werning and Jérôme Dokic, a philosopher from Institut Jean-Nicod in Paris. Finally, Pierre Etevenon (who also wrote about yoga and states of consciousness), Dennis Wier, Laurence Caruana and Alexandre Quanranta (philosopher, lucid-dream and yoga instructor) discussed the various "Practical uses of Altered States of Consciousness." This intense week ended with a convivial dinner in a Parisian "brasserie," followed --for the ones still awake-- by an all-night long party, starting with natural trance and finishing with psychedelic trance.

Organizational Issues

Since the beginning, our research group has benefited from the precious support of the RISC in France (Cognitive Science Information Network, affiliated to CNRS), who is hosting our Web site, promoting our activities, providing working spaces and supplying video equipment. We are very grateful for its enthusiastic working staff. For a number of reasons, this year's symposium was self-financed, (we're looking for and hoping to get financial support for the next Symposium). Registration was free; attendants were selected by the scientific committee after preregistration. Our speakers came at their own expense, in a generous gesture, to participate in the event, and some had financial help from their own institutions. We also benefited from the help of qualified volunteers. Our idea in making this event free was to make it accessible, especially for students. It turned out to be quite successful as it attracted a large number of students from all over France, Belgium, Switzerland, and Germany. Despite

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the lack of external funding, we had a professional sound engineer as well as a cameraman, and most of the talks in French were simultaneously translated into English, using a wireless headset system (and the services of an amateur but inspired translator).

We are aware of several flaws regarding the organization and are working toward improvement for next year's symposium. For instance, for 2009 we will have twice the capacity for the venue in order to accept more participants, and we will discourage no-show's and get some funding by charging an affordable registration fee. We are very open to suggestions and financial support from sponsors for next year's Symposium (April 8-11, 2009, Paris).

Future Actions and Conclusions

One of our current goals is to share the insights and knowledge gained during the past events with students, researchers and the general public in France and internationally. Several steps have been taken to that end. Some selected contributions of this year's symposium will be published in a forthcoming issue of a journal. The whole symposium 2008 has been videotaped and we are currently working on editing the audio podcasts and video DVDs. Videos from the 2007 workshops are already available and can be ordered through our Web page: <http://hallucinations.risc.cnrs.fr/symposium2008/eng> (sales are solely used to keep our events running).

The French edition of *Scientific American* requested an article from one of our speakers and the scientific magazine *Cerveau et Psycho* (Brain and Psychology) is preparing a special issue for 2009 on hallucinations, with several contributors from our speakers. The editing committee is enthusiastic and will highlight some not-so-well-known scientific facts regarding psychedelics, such as their non-addictive nature and therapeutic potential. Furthermore, we are planning various events in the years to come in order to maintain an interconnected community of researchers and students around this topic. This shall be our humble contribution toward stimulating psychedelic research in France. Moreover, we were pleased to learn from Rick Doblin that MAPS is exploring the possibility to start a French MDMA/PTSD pilot study.

Finally, we are glad to announce that we are finalizing the legal status of a non-profit Research Association, and are already preparing next year's symposium. Don't hesitate to contact us regarding any questions, comments, suggestions, financial support, collaboration proposals, etc. through our Web page – <http://hallucinations.risc.cnrs.fr/symposium2008/eng> – or at: parishallucinations@gmail.com