

AKADÉMIAI KIADÓ

Of pharmakon: Hallucination in Amerindian perspectivism and speculative materialism

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ABSTRACT

Aims: The paper discusses the concepts of hallucination and psychedelic experience in philosophical and anthropological contexts, where these terms bring in presuppositions regarding body and soul, nature and culture. *Method:* The discussion of the concepts is presented in the context of the debate between Viveiros de Castro's Amerindian perspectivism and Meillassoux's speculative materialism, where in the former the concepts have undergone an anthropological *epoché* in addressing the problematic presuppositions of unreality and in the latter hallucination and related concepts appear in a canonical western sense as imitations of the real. *Results:* This debate appears to be closely related to the project of naturalization of spirituality. The critique also extends to concepts such as *psychedelic* and *entheogen*. In respect to certain indigenous concepts like *kepigari* of the Matsigenka, observed in anthropology (Shepard, 2018; Danowski, Viveiros de Castro, 2021) and by revisiting Derrida's *Plato's Pharmacy* (1981) we suggest that the philosopheme of *pharmakon* suits the role of proximity with indigenous thought for comparative analyses and offers a perspective for psychedelic philosophy. *Conclusions:* The suggestion of considering psychedelics as an existential medicine (Letheby, 2017) could be interpreted as offering a *pharmakon* with ambiguous, indeterminate possibilities which would emphasize its theoretical soundness.

KEYWORDS

pharmakon, hallucination, psychedelic experience, Amerindian perspectivism, speculative materialism

INTRODUCTION

From the famous observations by William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, regarding the “filmiest of screens” separating various modes of consciousness (2009, pp. 292–293), to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (2005, p. 26) and Jean-Paul Sartre's (Gerrassi, 2009, pp. 193–194) phenomenological experiments with mescaline, psychedelics were, to some extent, of interest to philosophers. However, in the second decade of the 21st century an increase in the focus on psychedelics has been observed in academic philosophy, particularly in research areas such as selfless consciousness, psychedelic epistemology, psychedelic ethics, and spiritual/religious naturalism (Letheby & Mattu, 2021). The fourth line of inquiry is motivated by a philosophical project of naturalizing spirituality (Letheby, 2017; Steinhart, 2018), which is seen as a possible answer to philosophical problems of disenchantment and nihilism arriving from the naturalist outlook to the world. The discussion is whether acute psychedelic experiences (in some sources described as hallucinations (Flanagan & Graham, 2017; Langlitz, 2012; Lundborg, 2016)) constitute spiritual engagements and mystical visions (Griffiths, Richards, McCann, & Jesse, 2006) and in this way remedy the disenchantment or that they help to cope with and accept the existential consequences of the naturalist view by allowing to experience its deeper meaning, in short, psychedelics as an “existential medicine” (Letheby, 2017; Letheby & Mattu, 2021, p. 173). The scope of this discussion is limited by the conceptual frames of terminology like spirit and matter, nature and culture, body and mind which is both its theoretical strength and the

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point where it could benefit from alternative perspectives. This paper proposes an alternative perspective to look upon the themes of this discussion.

Eric Steinhart claims that the naturalization of spirituality includes, among other things, forms such as popular transformational festivals (known as raves) with induction of altered states of consciousness (sometimes by using psychedelics) along with collective dancing and ritualized opening and closing ceremonies (2018, pp. 346–347). If the aforementioned rave culture is to be an example, these festivals often include invited indigenous people: musicians, shamans, artists who perform the ceremonies. Such tendencies open up to anthropological theories of reception of indigenous metaphysics, some of which include psychedelics in their foundation. The psychedelic cultural exchange in transformational festivals implies an interesting mimetic condition (Lawtoo, 2022) when the western people imitate indigenous ceremonies of consumption of psychedelics. The anthropological theory discussed in this paper scrutinizes the philosophical reception of indigenous perspective regarding, among other things, psychedelics such as Ayahuasca, and, as a result of this analysis, a critique of the terminology of description of shamanic practice emerges in a form of questioning the terms such as hallucination, hallucinogens, psychedelics, entheogens.

In recent decades a movement has emerged in anthropology that became known as the ontological turn, unified by a return to pre-Kantian kind of questions regarding the status of reality and the limits of the human point of view; in this respect, it emerged in parallel with the movement of speculative realism (Viveiros de Castro, 2014b). The term ‘Ontological Turn’ was introduced in the collection *Thinking Through Things* (Henare, Holbraad, & Wastell, 2007). One of the key authors related to the turn is Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, whose philosophical and anthropological position is called Amerindian perspectivism. It is based on indigenous Amazonian mythopoetics, resulting in a crystallization of a couple of powerful philosophical concepts such as multi-naturalism and specific indigenous perspectivism. They are defined in contrast to western ontology which presupposes a singular reality or world, or nature (researched by natural sciences) and a multitude of cultural, social, political and other perspectives (engaged by social sciences and humanities). Amerindian perspectivism is defined by a rejection of singular nature for a multitude of variations of nature(s) (many-worlds) and by adaptation of the indigenous notion of universal personal perspective, shared by various entities, besides humans, referred to as the cosmological deictics (Descola, 2013; Viveiros de Castro, 1998, 2014a). Multi-naturalism offers a valuable perspective to appreciate the basic presuppositions of naturalism. This is the point where tension rises between the project of naturalization of spirituality with regard to psychedelic research and these particular developments in philosophical anthropology which also include investigations of psychedelic consciousness because the relevant indigenous ontologies are based on structuralized meanings of the use of psychedelics such as Ayahuasca and others. Should we reinterpret indigenous

practices with Ayahuasca and explain their meaning in terms of naturalist spirituality or should we allow these practices to reveal their own meaning as it is in their original setting? This question emerges in the contexts of post-colonialism, authority, and power, thus the adoption of indigenous practices with psychedelics for naturalist spirituality (Steinhart, 2018) is ambiguous with various positive and negative aspects. The epistemic position of knowledge-authority of naturalism in regard to indigenous cosmology may be seen as clashing with the psychedelic ethos of ego-loss, humility, and appreciation. The alternative would be letting the psychedelic experience itself frame its reception and interpretation, as suggested by Patrick Lundborg (2016). We will refer to the myth of the origin of Ayahuasca, interpreted by Viveiros de Castro, to illustrate the point that psychedelic experience may provide the structure for an alternative ontology which is at least interesting in the pursuit of formulating philosophy with regard to psychedelics. The naturalization of spirituality attempts to imagine spirituality without supernatural, spiritual, non-corporeal entities, thus Amerindian perspectivism and other anthropological positions such as animism (Descola, 2013), focusing on human and non-human relations, often established through the use of psychedelics, suggest a valuable vantage point to consider how the tendencies of naturalization of spirituality are developing coextensively with the reception of indigenous shamanism and spiritualized use of psychedelics which is exactly what is happening in the transformational festivals that Steinhart refers to.

In recent years Amerindian perspectivism came into discussion with speculative realism and, particularly, Meillassoux’s speculative materialism which is articulated as a form of naturalism distancing itself from the analytic/continental traditions of philosophy. The naturalization of spirituality as a philosophical project benefits from consideration of various conceptions of naturalism and materialism since Meillassoux’s philosophy is also concerned with the problems of disenchantment. In addition, Meillassoux portrays his position as a staunch anti-spiritualism, thus this far-reaching philosophical trajectory from the reception of altered states of consciousness that inform the naturalization of spirituality to alternative notions of nature and naturalism provides some context for a philosophical appreciation of psychedelic experience.

In the discussion with Meillassoux, Viveiros de Castro has employed the concept of hallucination being aware of its metaphysical presuppositions, thus in this paper, we trace the discussion and the use of the concept of hallucination to pave the way for further reconsideration of the concept on the basis of recent anthropological developments. In addition, by referring to Derrida’s *Plato’s Pharmacy* (1981) we will suggest the concept of *pharmakon* as an alternative to terms like hallucinogen, psychedelic, entheogen, in cases where the western conceptual framework of nature-culture, body-mind is not relevant or is sought to be temporarily suspended or bracketed for various philosophical purposes, such as in the training of adaptation of alternative philosophical points of view or in the practice



of phenomenological reduction of presuppositions, arriving from the natural attitude. The concept of *pharmakon* provides a far-reaching philosophical context and graceful indeterminacy to themes such as *remedying* the existential disenchantment by using psychedelics.

AMERINDIAN PERSPECTIVISM AND SPECULATIVE MATERIALISM

Amerindian perspectivism can be viewed as a comparative philosophical and anthropological project to arrive at the sense of anthropology, first set out by Roy Wagner, as comparative metaphysics (Skafish & Viveiros de Castro, 2016, pp. 394–395). In an interview with Peter Skafish, Viveiros de Castro reflects on the irritation that such philosophical concepts arouse among anthropologists (2016, pp. 395–398). The characteristic of the ontological turn as countering the linguistic turn that dominated 20th century humanities and social sciences is portrayed rather humbly as the change of perspective in admitting that the indigenous have their own metaphysics, seeing them as posing genuine metaphysical questions and comparing their ontology with that of the anthropologists' (Skafish & Viveiros de Castro, 2016, p. 396). He recalls how the idea of appropriating the concept of perspectivism was first conceived when Viveiros de Castro was working with the Araweté people:

It was the relation to alterity that put me on the track of perspectivism, in the first place, and that indicated to me that these people were engaged in an extremely sophisticated kind of metaphysical speculation. Then I, along with my students, realized that this play of perspectives between self and other applied not only to human relationships but also to animals, plants, dead people, and so on. I then realized that every, let's say, element of the universe is a potential focus, a potential point of view – a perspective. (Skafish & Viveiros de Castro, 2016, p. 404)

These insights led Viveiros de Castro to be more and more at odds with the Kantian anthropological project. Later he realized that unknowingly these ontological considerations preceded or coincided with the origin of speculative realism: “I had no idea that people in other fields would soon be criticizing Kantian cosmology under the name of “correlationism”” (2016, p. 398). The core of the critique of correlationism also extended to phenomenology and, among other things, has bearing on the phenomenological approach to psychedelics.

In *The Ends of the World* Viveiros de Castro and Déborah Danowski interpret speculative realism and particularly the position of Meillassoux and there the term hallucination and its sibling terms (illusion, etc.) are employed, the terms that are hardly avoidable in tackling the problem of altered states of consciousness with psychedelics. The priority of human-world relation has a lot to do with how people and researchers from western societies approach psychedelics and the problematic aspects of this approach are particularly evident from the anthropological perspectives.

The context of the rise of what Meillassoux had called correlationism is introduced in this passage:

Modern anthropocentrism or humanism, therefore, corresponds to the “us before the world” scheme, a position of transcendental anteriority of the human which is all the more constitutive of this world the more humans, as empirical beings, show themselves to be constituted by it. And while this anteriority can be seen, on the one hand, as a prerogative – manifest in the creative negativity expressed in every project of “transforming the world” – it can also be denounced and lamented as a degenerative disease: the end of beautiful pagan immanence, the phantasmatic doubling of reality, the betrayal of the Earth, the forgetfulness of Being, a feeling of meaninglessness, relativism, nihilism. Especially in its post-Romantic phase, first with the various existentialisms and, later, with post-modern constructionisms, the rift between subject and world becomes, as Latour has argued in some essential pages, an absolute ontological incommensurability... The crisis of what would come to be known as “correlationism” effectively began long before the name was coined. (Danowski & Viveiros de Castro, 2017, p. 29)

These very problems of nihilism and disenchantment, rooted in the correlationist view, seen here from perspectivist and speculative materialist positions are also at the very core of one of the key directions of psychedelic philosophical discourse, suggesting psychedelics as the means to experience more fulfilling lives (Letheby, 2017).

There is a problem, however, in that some evidence suggests that the existential reenchantment occasioned by psychedelics depends crucially on the induction of mystical experiences involving apparent encounters with transcendent nonnatural levels of reality (Griffiths et al., 2006). If this is so, then psychedelics would seem less a means to making peace with a naturalistic worldview than a means to becoming persuaded of its falsity. (Letheby, 2017, p. 624)

Chris Letheby claims that spiritual psychedelic experiences are compatible with the naturalist view and may be practiced in intellectual good faith (2017, p. 624).

After Meillassoux gave the term correlationism its present meaning and conceptual power and then faced it with an *aporia* of ancestrality, it had spread across the discourses at an astonishing rate. It marked the priority of human-world relation after Kant as the beginning of the loss of the “great outdoors” (Meillassoux, 2008, p. 17) in philosophy and beyond which resulted in the crisis of disenchantment. It means that Meillassoux's materialism has some common and important ground with naturalist spirituality in psychedelic philosophy: the former considers the roots and the causes, the latter suggests solutions for the same problems of disenchantment and nihilism, seen from different philosophical perspectives.

Quoting the definition of correlationism in *After Finitude*, Danowski and Viveiros de Castro continue to ironically reconstruct Meillassoux's position:

Naturally, the culprit here is Kant, who allegedly led philosophy down a path distancing it infinitely from the “Great



Outdoors” and trapping it inside the golden cage of the subject. With Kant, in short, we have lost the world and turned inwards, in what could be described as a veritable psychotic episode in the history of our metaphysics: the modern constitutive subject is a narcissistic hallucination... (Danowski & Viveiros de Castro, 2017, pp. 31–32)

Meillassoux claims we cannot maintain that we inject the world with sensible properties as in a perpetual hallucination (2008, p. 8), while the Brazilian thinkers hold that the modern constitutive subject, the subject of transcendental, correlationist philosophies itself is a narcissistic hallucination, a self-declared Napoleon in a provincial madhouse (Danowski & Viveiros de Castro, 2017, p. 32). Viveiros de Castro and Danowski betray a sympathy for the thinkers who had made correlationism into a prominent philosopheme. It does allow to observe the narcissism of modern philosophical subject. The narcissism of philosophical anthropology has been noted by Viveiros de Castro in his treatise *Cannibal Metaphysics* (2014a). There he wrote that anthropological and philosophical theory of the human “has always been a little too obsessed with determining the attributes or criteria that fundamentally distinguish the subject of anthropological discourse from everything it is not: *them* (which really in the end means us), the non-Occidentals, the nonmoderns, the nonhumans” (2014a, p. 43). He suggests narcissism marked the impulse of such discourses. From this point, an observation of the narcissism of modern philosophical subject is right around the corner. The positions of Amerindian perspectivism and speculative materialism converge in a peculiar way: Meillassoux would seem to be maintaining that ontological exclusivity or the correlationist circle is unavoidable, thus the argument of ancestry becomes an *aporia* for correlationism precisely due to its seeming unavoidability (2014, p. 17), while Viveiros de Castro research discloses Amerindian ontology as stressing the connectivity of various, also non-human subjects and shows that from such a vantage point the correlationist view gives access to non-human perspective (Danowski, Viveiros de Castro, & Sabolius, 2021, pp. 306–307).

The authors of *The Ends of the World* summarize their evaluation of Meillassoux’s materialism:

We tend to agree with Shaviro (2011) when he points out how Meillassoux’s and Brassier’s presupposition that matter, if it is to exist in itself (outside correlation), must be passive and inert – in the sense of insentient, indifferent, and meaningless – reintroduces the human exceptionalism that it purported to eliminate. The anti-anthropocentric decision at the root of these two versions of the “world without us” theme reveals itself to be, when all is said and done, obsessed with the human point of view. (Danowski & Viveiros de Castro, 2017, p. 33)

That is one of the strongest arguments against these particular types of speculative realism. The imaginary of the world devoid of perspective is a caricature – a perspective that is evidently anthropocentric and conceals a propositional attitude probably best described as irony.

The term hallucination smuggles Cartesian dualism into the discourse and with it – the modern subject’s ontological exclusivity, thus it is rather paradoxical or absurd that narcissistic hallucination marks said ontological exclusivity. It is a particularly sensitive case, as was noted by Glenn H. Shepard (2018, p. 73), in Amazonian and other indigenous contexts, where this concept seems to be unavoidable in descriptions of shamanic practices with psychedelics.

OF PHARMAKON

Further considerations are in debt to Shepard’s article *Spirit Bodies, Plant Teachers and Messenger Molecules in Amazonian Shamanism* (2018) which marks an ongoing breakthrough in the terminology of description of psychedelic practices and it is pertinent not only for specific local ethnologies but for philosophy, anthropology, and psychedelic research. He insists that

Kepigari refers to the physiological state of intoxication, including bouts of dizziness, fainting, nausea and vomiting, as well as drunkenness, shamanic ecstasy and even insanity. In chants that accompany shamanistic ceremonies, singers evoke the physical and cognitive sensations of these experiences, and *kepigari* is intoned frequently to denote the whirling, giddy sensation of ecstasy. Plants used to induce altered states of consciousness like tobacco, *ayahuasca* and *Brugmansia* (fundamental to the Matsigenka shaman’s transformative powers) are all *kepigari*. I hesitate to use Western terms like “psychoactive,” “narcotic,” “hallucinogenic” or “psychedelic” to refer to these shamanic substances, since such terms reinforce the foundational distinction René Descartes drew between *res extensa* (“extended [i.e. in space] things”), or material substance, versus *res cogitans* (“thinking things”), or mental substance. Cartesian dualism between mind and body remains a fundamental problem in Western science and philosophy; in working with peoples who have different notions about the world and its various substances and beings, we find ourselves tripping over it all the time. For example, when we say a plant is “psychoactive” or “psychedelic,” we focus on mental, emotional and psychic states, as if these were somehow separate from physiological effects in the body. By calling such substances “hallucinogens” we further denigrate them by assuming that the visions they produce are mere hallucinations, fantasies, fallacies. (Shepard, 2018, p. 73–74)

It signals the need for a philosophical reconceptualization of terminology and of reception and interpretation of the meaning of psychedelic experience for the indigenous. Anthropologists such as Viveiros de Castro, Philippe Descola, Eduardo Kohn, and others run into this problem whenever they are forced to use these concepts. They are very aware of the philosophical problems behind these concepts.

Viveiros de Castro’s *Cannibal Metaphysics* notes the importance of ingestion of hallucinatory drugs to induce “identifications” with animals (2014a, p. 168) and with it, defines perspectivism in a way tying our investigations to the



problem of perspective: “*Perspectivism directly refers us to the becoming-sorcerer of Amerindian mythology.*” (2014a, p. 168) In this way, perspectivism may be understood as a philosophy of psychedelic experience of transformation. Viveiros de Castro emphasizes the last statement to focus our attention on the relationship between psychedelics, hallucination, witchcraft, myth, folklore and perspectivism. Psychedelic experiences are constituting different perspectives and there is an inherent comparative mode in the very possibility of altered state of consciousness: of tracing the differences between the ordinary state of the natural attitude and the altered state.

Kant had used the term *dream* (2007, pp. 70–71) to refer to hallucination, which is often a more neutral term, yet it is also inadequate to describe hallucination, particularly in the case of psychedelic experience. Viveiros de Castro is aware of these terminological difficulties. In an interview, he said

They use very material technology of imagination, which is Ayahuasca. It modifies your consciousness. What they call dreams is not what we call dreams, meaning sleeping. What they call dreams is sleeping, but also the effects of hallucinogenic drugs, which makes you see things, strange things which you don't see normally. That's why dreaming is not a very good translation of what they do. They call it dreaming because there's no other word, but it's hallucinating actually. Although, hallucination is not a very good word, because hallucination means profound unreality. There is the whole problem of the indigenous epistemology of what is real and what is not, what is the status of dreaming *vis-à-vis* wakefulness. It is at the same time truer, but less real, let's say material, but it is actually truer because it points precisely to the virtual aspects of things. What you see in dreams is not actual, it's virtual. What you see in dreaming would be the contemplation of the virtual. (Danowski et al., 2021, p. 320)

Viveiros de Castro would rather speak of material technology of imagination and refer to the *virtuality* of experience. It indicates the application of specific anthropological *epoche*, characteristic of the ontological turn, of reducing one's presuppositions, inherited from the western culture, which makes this approach relatively close to and coextensive with Husserl's phenomenology, a philosophy hailed by some psychedelists as particularly suitable for the field (Lundborg, 2016; Szummer et al., 2017). According to some theorists, the ontological turn is a radical continuation and refinement of phenomenology in the anthropological crucible (Pedersen, 2020). This, as well as Shepard's considerations, indicate a trajectory of critique not only of the term hallucination but of general presuppositions lying behind the approach to psychedelics. How does one incorporate psychedelic experiences into the total horizon of life? One explanation is that they are meaningful for life-experience as a whole because of their virtuality, which, as is explained by Viveiros de Castro, relates to precosmological conditions: “Mythic discourse registers the movement by which the present state of things is actualized from a virtual, precosmological condition that is perfectly transparent – a

cha-osmos where the corporeal and spiritual dimensions of beings do not yet conceal each other.” (2014a, p. 65–66) Virtuality in “*dreaming*” opens up the means of consulting with fundamental constitutives of cha-osmos. This perspective of virtuality of psychedelic experience is a very attractive conceptual direction for looking at the problems of nihilism and disenchantment, nevertheless, it could be further nourished by applying one very perspectivist concept crucial to the western metaphysics.

The famous *Plato's Pharmacy* by Jacque Derrida (1981) dwells on Plato's graceful interpretative indeterminacy of the concept of *pharmakon* (Plato, 1925). Shepard and perhaps other ethnologists probably already have noticed the amazing resemblance between indigenous idioms referring to the effects of psychoactive substances (concepts like *kepigari*) and *pharmakon*. He notes

The term *entheogen*, “revealing God (or the divine) within” (Ruck et al., 1979), was coined to overcome the bias and derogatory nature implicit in terms like “hallucinogen.” And yet, the Greek term *theos* at the root of the expression ironically reinforces the tenets of Cartesian philosophy by emphasizing the third substance posited by Descartes, namely God, *res infinita*, a special kind of “thinking substance” that, unlike mortal human thought, is infinite in scope. Indeed, many entheogen users focus their enthusiasm on the spiritual and religious aspects of their experiences, while minimizing, or even consciously attempting to eliminate, unpleasant physiological side-effects like nausea. For the Matsigenka, there is no such thing as “side effects,” since the physical, mental and spiritual dimensions of shamanic plants are all integrated with their overt chemosensory properties (bitter taste, toxicity) into the single concept of *kepigari*, “intoxicating.” (Shepard, 2018, p. 74)

But the Ancient Greek term *pharmakon* is precisely the concept with inherent disruptive, bitter indeterminacy between the poisonous and the remedying aspects of its meaning that Plato plays upon and which is turned against Platonism and the rest of philosophy by Derrida. Shepard uses the concept of *pharmakon* in definition of the Amazonian perspective but does not, as far as we know, refer to Plato's or Derrida's famous plays. “In this review of Matsigenka pharmacology and pharmacognosy, I have sought to show how their understandings of illness agents, spirit beings, and shamanic powers are revealed through the direct experience of specific plant substances. In this sense, the Cartesian divide simply falls away.” (Shepard, 2018, p. 78) *Pharmakognosy* is a particularly philosophically attractive concept to refer to various voluntary inductions of altered states of consciousness bestowing peculiar ontological *gnosis* or remedying the disenchantment with existence. Cartesian dualism falls away because particular shamanic worldview and consumption of psychedelic *pharmakons* present peculiar materialism of the “soul”, which is fundamentally affected, reconstituted, healed, poisoned by *pharmakognostic* practices – ceremonial, medicinal, epistemic consumption of plants, fungi, etc., during which the birth of a concept is inseparable from the bodily effects of the *pharmakons*.



In general, we would suggest charging the concept of *pharmakon* with its full philosophical, deconstructive, therapeutic, and pharmacological potential and then applying it in interpreting the indigenous notions such as *kepigari* – drawing upon a tension between western philosophy, indigenous idioms, and any other ethnographic discourses which run into philosophical contexts. By no means fusing or using them interchangeably, we propose the tension between these perspectives may reveal a direction of investigations for a radically decolonized philosophical theory of psychedelic experience. Since terms like *autopoiesis* and *sympoiesis* are very much in fashion (Lagrou, 2018, p. 135), Shepard's conceptual suggestions are at their best when he uses terms like *pharmacopoeia* and *pharmacopeia* (2018, p. 74, 76) in specific philosophical/ontological and ethnological contexts. *Pharmakopoesis* as an ontological concept – a creating, an imagining of each other in tandem with *pharmakons*, co-creative, even co-genetic act – falls right among today's popular philosophemes.

Still, *pharmakon* retains the original herbalist, materialist meaning: the experience comes from learning *about* and *from* herbs, mushrooms, minerals, etc. “Plant teachers”, as Shepard says, having heard this from the Matsigenka. The focus also should remain on the “poisonous” aspect of *pharmakon*, of concepts and substances having destructive power if injected into specific bodies or discourses. An example of this is Viveiros de Castro's perspectivism, which, according to Latour, is a bomb, planted under the whole modern philosophy (2009, p. 2). For us, it is interpreted as *pharmakon*: containing ambiguous possibilities.

Together with Derrida, we will briefly revisit Plato's *Pharmacy*, still, however, with interest in the question of the reception of psychedelic experience. “We are speaking of the *Phaedrus* that was obliged to wait almost twenty-five centuries before anyone gave up the idea that it was a badly composed dialogue.” (1981, p. 66) There are hints of ecstatic experience in *Phaedrus*, picked up by Derrida, when he notes that they appear in the very middle of the dialogue:

The logographer, in the strict sense, is a *ghost writer* who composes speeches for use by litigants, speeches which he himself does not pronounce, which he does not attend, so to speak, in person, and which produce their effects in his absence. In writing what he does not speak, what he would never say and, in truth, would probably never even think, the author of the written speech is already entrenched in the posture of the sophist: the man of non-presence and of non-truth. Writing is thus already on the scene. The incompatibility between the *written* and the *true* is clearly announced at the moment Socrates starts to recount the way in which men are carried out of themselves by pleasure, become absent from themselves, forget themselves and die in the thrill of song (259c). (1981, p. 68)

This philosophical parallel and tension between ecstasies of being carried away by philosophical dialogue or rhetoric and ecstasies of intoxication are carefully analyzed in Michael A. Rinella's book *Pharmakon: Plato, Drug Culture, and Identity in Ancient Athens* (2010). In symposiums, especially strong *pharmakon* wine was drunk before the recreational

drinking commenced emphasizing the symbolism of moderation. He quotes Theophrastus:

According to Theophrastus in a surviving fragment of his *On Drunkenness*, this unmixed wine was drunk “only in small quantity” as a lawful acknowledgement of the powers being invoked, “as a reminder, through a mere taste, of the strength of the god's gift” (Athenaeus 15.693d). Wine was a substance that could only be consumed cautiously, being “a *pharmakon* [drug] which sends men mad of they do not control its consumption as regards strength and quality.” (2010, p. 12)

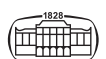
Moderate intoxication as an acknowledgment of lawfulness and of power of *pharmakon* meant consumption of addictive *pharmakon* not to become addicted but to ward off unwanted unlawful dependency and madness.

Derrida cleverly approaches the theme of *pharmakon*, first by observing that Plato left a hint towards such reading at the beginning of the *Phaedrus* dialogue: the scene is set near river Ilissus, where, according to myth, Orithyia was carried off by Boreas.

Socrates then mockingly proposes a learned explanation of the myth in the rationalistic, physicalist style of the *sophoi*: it was while she was playing with Pharmacia (*sun Pharmakeiai paizousan*) that the boreal wind (*pneuma Boreou*) caught Orithyia up and blew her into the abyss... / This brief evocation of Pharmacia at the beginning of the *Phaedrus* – is it an accident? An hors d'oeuvre? A fountain, “perhaps with curative powers,” notes Robin, was dedicated to Pharmacia near the Ilissus. Let us in any case retain this: that a little spot, a little stitch or mesh (*macula*) woven into the back of the canvas, marks out for the entire dialogue the scene where that *virgin* was cast into the abyss, surprised by death *while playing with Pharmacia*. Pharmacia (*Pharmakeia*) is also a common noun signifying the administration of the *pharmakon*, the drug: the medicine and/or poison. (Derrida, 1981, p. 69–70)

Socrates' dismissal of naive myth folds ironically on the top when he later creates/refers to a myth in which Egyptian god Thoth presents a *pharmakon* for memory – writing. Playing with Pharmacia, says Derrida, may end in the loss of virginal purity and unpenetrated interior (1981, p. 70). That points to Derrida's reading of Plato's simile of the Cave playing upon the dissemination of interiority and exteriority. The parallel and tension arise between *pharmakon* – meaning *writing* and *pharmakon* – meaning the communicated biosemiotics, the *meaning* of messenger molecules. Derrida writes:

Only a little further on, Socrates compares the written texts *Phaedrus* has brought along to a drug (*pharmakon*). This *pharmakon*, this “medicine,” this philter, which acts as both remedy and poison, already introduces itself into the body of the discourse with all its ambivalence. This charm, this spellbinding virtue, this power of fascination, can be – alternately or simultaneously – beneficent or maleficent. The *pharmakon* would be a *substance* – with all that that word can connote in terms of matter with occult virtues, cryptic depths refusing to submit their ambivalence to analysis, already paving the way for alchemy – if we didn't have



eventually to come to recognize it as antistubstance itself: that which resists any philosopheme, indefinitely exceeding its bounds as nonidentity, nonessence, nonsubstance; granting philosophy by that very fact the inexhaustible adversity of what funds it and the infinite absence of what founds it. (1981, p. 70)

These are the famous lines where the concept of *pharmakon* is explicated in mythological, mystical, and philosophical contexts in a way that preserves inexhaustible interpretative depth and thus can be tentatively compared with indigenous pharmakognostic idioms. The concept also preserves indeterminacy in refusing to belong to any of the discourses: by materializing the “soul” of the consumer, mythologizing philosophy, by mystifying and demystifying shamanic practices. It becomes the key to unraveling and unthreading the western philosophical tradition in observing how arbitrary the translation, reception, and reiteration of this term had been. By arbitrarily choosing which concept best suits *pharmakon* in translation, the whole direction of philosophy could be signified by radically different accents or “led astray” (Derrida, 1981, p. 71).

Our interest should be captivated by the naïveté inherent in every approach to *pharmakon*. One cannot help but be naïve in choosing the inherent meanings, one cannot initially know which meaning should be chosen and why.

Is it after all by chance or by harmonics that, even before the overt presentation of writing as a *pharmakon* arises in the middle of the myth of Theuth, the connection between *biblia* and *pharmaka* should already be mentioned in a malevolent or suspicious vein? As opposed to the true practice of medicine, founded on science, we find indeed, listed in a single stroke, empirical practice, treatments based on recipes learned by heart, mere bookish knowledge, and the blind usage of drugs. All that, we are told, springs out of *mania*: “I expect they would say, ‘the man is mad; he thinks he has made himself a doctor by picking up something out of a book (*ek bibliou*), or coming across a couple of ordinary drugs (*pharmakiois*), without any real knowledge of medicine” (268c). (Derrida, 1981, p. 72)

All in all, the inexhaustible indeterminacy of the concept of *pharmakon* has a lot of potential for a project of comparative metaphysics, as envisioned by the proponents of the ontological turn in anthropology.

The reason to suggest the concept of *pharmakon* as a descriptive instrument for psychedelics and psychedelic experience is both because of its comparative aptitude in anthropology and its philosophical, interpretative depth, but also because psychedelic experience itself is being suggested in contemporary academic philosophy as a remedy or an existential medicine for the disenchantment and nihilism, emerging from the naturalist worldview. Remedy implies the ambiguity and indeterminacy of *pharmakon*, because psychedelics and other psychoactive substances may have beneficial or negative effects, “good trips” or “bad trips”, may cause nausea or paranoia, even though more often result in euphoria and amazement with the magnificence of existence. In addition, purely on a theoretical level, concepts such as *psychedelic* experience, referring to the *psyche* or soul’s

revelation, or hallucination are themselves in some cases beneficial and clarifying and in other cases – obfuscating and causing misinterpretation.

Yet another reason to consider the term is the observation that the consumption of psychedelics, particularly in the transformational festivals, often includes imitation of indigenous ceremonies or their elements. One thing is the intellectual and theoretical reception of indigenous psychedelic understanding, and another is the physical imitation of spiritually charged activities. The contemporary theory of *mimesis* suggests viewing *mimesis* itself as *pharmakon* with both beneficial and negative aspects (Lawtoo, 2021, p. 156). This particular case of imitation of psychedelic culture also includes ambiguous intentions and outcomes like in the emergence of Ayahuasca tourism and its economic, legal, and environmental ramifications.

The *pharmakon*-like aspect is noted by Letheby when he claims that if psychedelic experience entails engagement with the spiritual, it works as a means to become persuaded of the falsity of the naturalist worldview (2017, p. 624). So from the naturalist perspective, such a possibility is viewed as detrimental to the naturalist cause. Letheby claims that psychedelic experience may be viewed as beneficial and complementary to the naturalist view, perhaps even if accompanied by ceremonial practice. Viveiros de Castro’s suggestion is to view psychedelics as a material technology of imagination, which is quite similar to what Csaba Szummer and colleagues propose (Szummer et al., 2017), and psychedelic experience as revealing not the spiritual, but the virtual; the subtle difference is in the indeterminacy of the corporeal and spiritual spheres, like in the conceptual amalgamation in the term of *cha-osmos* (Viveiros de Castro, 2014a, p. 65–66). To illustrate this point we will refer to the myth of the origin of Ayahuasca from western Amazonia, as it is interpreted by Viveiros de Castro:

People normally think dualistically in terms of body and spirit, but the myth is precisely about the origin of Ayahuasca. So there is this man, who is fishing and he sees a beautiful woman and tries to touch her, but she transforms into a snake and then she recoils and becomes a woman again. Finally, they get to understand one another and she says: “Well, you want to put some eye-drops into your eyes, and you’ll see things the way they really are. And then you follow me into the lake.” He puts in the drops, she stabilizes as a woman and he follows her to the bottom of the lake, where is her city, her village. He marries her and they live with their brothers-in-law in the lake. One day the father of the woman says: “Let’s drink this potion we are preparing in the ceremony.” And he was invited to drink the potion. Then the woman says: “Don’t drink it, you’re not going to like what you’re going to see if you drink it.” Then he drinks the potion forced by his in-laws. After he takes the potion, he sees how these people really were: they were snakes, all of them. So the point is that when you take the drug Ayahuasca here, you see real snakes as women, when you take it there, you see real women as snakes. (Danowski et al., 2021, p. 320–321)

Viveiros de Castro explains by pointing to the fundamental ambiguity of reality and appearance:



Inside the lake, you live in the world of souls, but they are seen as bodies. But when you take a drug and see the souls of these bodies, these souls are actually the bodies that you see here. So there's no hierarchy of appearance and essence. Appearance of appearance is the essence. Essence is the appearance of the appearance... The other side for us is something like the beyond, which is transcendent. What I try to show in this myth is that the other side of the other side is this side. Everything is the other side, so there's no right side. When you go to the other side and take a drug that allows you to see the other side, what you see is this side. There is no real image and the mirror image, just images. (2021, p. 321)

This myth is not only of the origin of Ayahuasca, but it is itself an origin of the metaphysics of this particular group of indigenous peoples: how through Ayahuasca one learns about the true ambiguity of nature of the worlds. The philosophical essence of Viveiros de Castro's research demonstrates how such a view entails perspectivism without devolving into relativism. The veracity of these indigenous metaphysics is indefinitely confirmed by shamanic practices with psychedelics, and the visions and experiences of the shamans are grounded in the real through reference to this origin of ontology. The term *pharmakopoesis* fits the situation, where the people create psychedelic *pharmakons* and *pharmakons* create the people in an ontological sense.

One gets a sense that spirituality *versus* naturalism predicament regarding the meaning of psychedelic experience may be viewed in a similar light, spirituality of psychedelic experience may be seen as a reflection of the naturalist view and the latter may reflect psychedelic experience. The concept of *pharmakon*, containing both materialist and existential/philosophical aspects, is well suited to be an important part of the descriptive terminology in reference to psychedelics.

CONCLUSIONS

One of the main directions of psychedelic philosophy evolved into a project of psychedelic naturalist spirituality, which suggests psychedelics as an existential medicine for the disenchantment with life and nihilism, emerging from every new wave of breakthroughs in the natural sciences. Psychedelics may provide means for reenchanting the naturalist picture without adding supernatural or spiritual elements. This model of reception of psychedelic experience seems to oppose animism and similar doctrines, which became prominent in contemporary anthropology, rethinking the frames in which we interpret what indigenous shamans claim based on their psychedelic experiences. Meillassoux's speculative materialism, an anti-spiritualist philosophy, is also concerned with the disenchantment – with the loss of the great outdoors, however it aims to look at the roots of the problem and finds them in Kant's transcendental turn and the subsequent correlationist direction of philosophy.

Danowski's and Viveiros de Castro's critique of speculative materialism emphasizes its anthropocentric character, the picture of the world without humans, drawn by Meillassoux,

ends up being obsessed with the human point of view. The critique employs the term hallucination in the definition of this anthropocentric character. Viveiros de Castro's and Shepard's considerations show how problematic concepts of hallucination, psychedelics, and entheogens are in anthropological contexts because of their Cartesian foundations. By revisiting Plato's *Pharmacy* with Derrida we suggest that the term *pharmakon* suits the discourse of psychedelic philosophy and anthropology because it provides a valuable indeterminacy of resemblance between philosophy and certain indigenous idioms that refer to psychedelic experiences such as *kepigari* of the Matsigenka.

The suggestion of considering psychedelics as an existential medicine, if thought from a broad philosophical perspective, looking back to Plato, appears to be offering a *pharmakon* with ambiguous possibilities: it may confirm or falsify the naturalist view, it may reenchant existence during the experience, but it also could make ordinary life fade in comparison. Nevertheless, this alignment with the conceptual flexibility of *pharmakon* adds to the theoretical depth of psychedelic philosophy.

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